VIOLENT
DEVOTION
L. NORELL

Violent Devotion

OceanofPDF.com

Empire Of Sins: Book One

L. Norell

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VIOLENT DEVOTION (Empire of Sins Book 1)
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Every unhinged word in this book was written by a real human who chose to spend months writing content that requires warnings. That takes commitment, creativity, and a deeply unwell imagination.

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To everyone who's been carrying stories inside them for years—all those characters demanding to be written, those worlds begging to exist.
It took me years to find the courage to let mine live on these pages. When you're ready, I hope you'll let yours live too.
Because your book will be someone's favorite one day. Keep writing.

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Author's Note:

First of all, thank you for picking up this book and giving a debut author a chance.

I hope with my whole heart that you fall in love with Kelly and Alexei the way I did. Writing their story has been one of the most fun things I've ever done, and the fact that you're here reading it still feels surreal.

In Alexei's chapters, Russian dialogue is written in italics, so it's easy to tell when characters are speaking Russian rather than English.

Just so you know going in: this book is completely unhinged. I didn't hold back on the violence or the gore and it goes into genuinely dark territory at times. The mafia in this series isn't just an aesthetic backdrop. It's on the page.

You'll see exactly what the most ruthless mafia family does to stay on top and what it costs them as human beings. I always wanted to read a mafia romance that didn't sanitize that side of things. I couldn't find one so I wrote it myself.

If you're here for danger and darkness and morally gray men doing terrible things for love you're exactly where you're supposed to be. But there's humor and banter and soft moments in there too and they'll make you melt I promise.

Violent Devotion is Book 1 in the Empire of Sins series. Dark MM mafia romances where each Avrorin brother gets his own story and his own forbidden love and his own guaranteed HEA. The books are interconnected so if something doesn't wrap up perfectly in this one don't worry. It'll come

back around. Think of it as one big family saga where nobody has a moral compass but they all get their love story.

Content warnings are on the next page. They're detailed and might spoil a few things so if you're comfortable with morally gray chaos and don't have specific triggers feel free to skip ahead and jump right in!

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Content Warning

This book is for an adult audience. It is a dark romance and should be treated as such.

Explicit violence is shown on page throughout.

This includes murder, torture, gun violence, knife violence, stabbings, beatings, blood, gore, and interrogations. The violence is not sanitized.

Explicit sexual content between two adult men. 18+

Domestic violence **(not between main characters)** and an abusive ex-partner are depicted.

Both main characters deal with PTSD and trauma responses. Past child abuse (physical) is referenced in a character's backstory but not shown on page.

Stalking and obsessive behavior are central to this story.

Drug addiction is referenced and discussed. Multiple scenes depict a side character actively under the influence. Alcoholism is also depicted.

Depression, anxiety, and panic attacks are portrayed.

Homophobic language and slurs are used, including the F slur. This reflects the realistic experiences of discrimination the characters face and does not reflect the author's values or beliefs.

Police brutality and harassment are depicted.

A character processes grief over the loss of a parent to cancer.

This story features morally gray characters doing terrible things. This book does not endorse violence, crime, or unhealthy relationships in real life.

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Contents

1. Kelly
2. Alexei
3. Kelly
4. Kelly
5. Alexei
6. Alexei
7. Kelly
8. Alexei
9. Kelly
10. Alexei
11. Kelly
12. Kelly
13. Alexei
14. Alexei
15. Kelly
16. Alexei
17. Kelly
18. Alexei
19. Kelly
20. Alexei
21. Kelly
22. Kelly
23. Alexei
24. Kelly
25. Alexei
26. Kelly
27. Alexei
28. Kelly
29. Alexei

Epilogue

What's Next in the Empire of Sins Series?
Acknowledgments

About the Author

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Chapter 1

Kelly

Six hours. That's how much longer I'm trapped in this fluorescent nightmare, watching the clock crawl toward freedom. The sleepiness creeps in, making every minute feel like an hour.

I sigh and pull out my stethoscope, adjusting it in my ears before opening the latch to the metal cage where a little brown lionhead rabbit sleeps, still recovering from yesterday's surgery. Someone found her bleeding in the middle of the street, brought her in, and left before we could even get a name.

She and a cat are staying overnight for observation. The only two patients I need to keep an eye on while I try not to fall asleep during this night shift.

I prefer nights. Nights mean I don't have to deal with people and their bullshit. No exhausting myself explaining the same thing over and over to owners who won't listen anyway.

The rabbit's heart rate is steady; she's just drowsy from the anesthesia. I give her a gentle scratch and close the latch. The cat hisses when I open his cage but tolerates the exam, letting me press the stethoscope to his chest. I note everything in his chart, secure the latch, and head out of the kennel area toward the office to tackle the paperwork I've been avoiding.

We usually keep one vet here at night for emergencies while the rest are on call since we handle all the K-9 injuries for the police. That doesn't happen often, so mostly the nights are quiet and peaceful. I walk past the whiteboard in the long hallway and scoff before flipping it off. My boss, Gary, is the biggest asshole on the entire planet and has written a passive-aggressive note for the overnight staff.

In other words, me.

The only reason I'm even still at this stupid clinic is because my best friend, Camilla, works here and helped me get the job. She's also the only reason I stay mentally sane while working here.

The office is ice cold, and the fluorescents hum like angry wasps. I power on the computer and immediately want to throw it out the window when the update screen loads. Great—no logging post-op notes today. Doesn't really matter though since the system eats them regularly anyway. Last week, it swallowed three full reports, and Gary forced me to rewrite everything from memory.

I drop my elbows on the desk and bury my face in my hands. I am one more software crash away from chucking this piece of shit and filing a break-in report. Not that anyone would believe someone broke in here since there's nothing worth stealing. The most exciting thing that's happened since I started working here two years ago was someone hurling a rock through the front window, and Gary still wouldn't get cameras. Said it "wasn't in the budget" and then spent two grand on a new espresso machine for his office that only he's allowed to use.

I rest my forehead against the desk. The surface is cold, a relief from the stale air and the quiet hum of the computer doing absolutely nothing. I close my eyes and sigh. This year's been a nightmare, and I'm barely holding it together.

My eyelids grow heavy. I'm too drained to fight it, so I let out a breath and don't move. Maybe a five-minute nap would help, just to stop thinking. My body sinks into the chair with arms crossed under my head while the sounds around me blur—the soft hum of the fridge in the break room, the ticking of the wall clock, the occasional creak from the hallway. It's not comfortable, but my brain shuts up for once.

Something startles me awake.

I jerk my head up, blinking hard against the computer screen's glare.

Fuck, I slept for twenty minutes. I straighten up and drag my palms down my face, working the kink out of my neck when a sound from the far end of the hallway stops me cold.

My stomach knots. Did I sleep through an alarm? Did someone bring in another K-9, and I missed it completely?

I move toward the door and lean against the frame. "Hello?"

Silence.

I walk through the hallway, past the staff lounge, toward the kennels. It's only the rabbit and the cat back here, and both of them are drugged to hell. No way they made that sound.

I scratch at my scalp, trying to think through the fog, when something crunches under my shoe. Glass. All over the floor. Big, sharp pieces scattered like gravel and catching light from outside, shining faint in the dark. I follow the trail that leads me to blood smeared across the tile.

My stomach knots.

The staff entrance has a shattered window. It's completely busted out, and the door's been unlocked from the inside through the broken glass. My arms were over my head when I was sleeping. Probably muffled the sound of the window breaking … Blood smears the glass shards and pools on the tile below.

I start backing away. I think I'm going to be sick …

Each step crunches louder than the last. I keep going until I hit something.

No, not something. *Someone*.

Arms grab me from behind, one across my mouth. I slip, and my whole body locks up. Cold metal presses to the side of my head, and I try to breathe, but my chest won't move. I can't talk, can't move, can't even think past the screaming in my skull.

This is it. This is how I go.

He's finally here to finish the job.

"Stop moving. You won't get another warning."

His arm tightens, his chest moving against my back—steady and controlled. That voice isn't what I expected. It's not from the man I thought was here to finish me off. This guy speaks with a thick foreign accent.

"You're going to walk us to the treatment room. If you speak, if you shout, if you try anything stupid, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

I nod or at least try to, but my throat's locked, and my legs won't stop shaking. I think I get one sound out before his grip tightens again, and he forces me forward.

He moves his hand from my mouth and then shoves me. I try to glance back, but the gun presses hard against the side of my head, pushing it forward again.

"W-we …" My voice shakes too much to finish, so I clear my throat. "We have drugs. I-if that's what you're after." The words come out choppy,

broken by fear. “Th-th-the drugs are locked up, but I can unlock it for you. It’s n-not a problem. We don’t keep anything strong, though. Nothing you’d really want.”

He makes a sound that’s something between annoyed and exasperated, making my stomach turn.

I lead him toward the treatment room. The hallway feels longer now, like every step stretches out too far. I open the door to the room and hit the lights. He pushes me in fast. I stumble, almost hitting the metal table in the middle of the room.

When I glance down, there’s blood soaked into the front of my scrubs. Not mine. His.

I raise my hands slowly as I turn to face him, heart thudding so hard I can barely hear anything else. This has to be a nightmare.

He’s way taller than me, dressed in black cargo pants with a holster strapped tight around his thigh and knives clipped to his belt. He must be at least six-four. His shirt’s a black Henley, soaked through and clinging to his chest while one hand is pressed to his stomach, slick with blood. The other’s holding the gun, still aimed directly at me.

His face is half-covered by a black gaiter pulled up past his nose, but his eyes are visible. They’re the kind of deep brown that almost looks black in this light, calculating and locked on me. His hair’s dark too, short on the sides, a little longer and curled over his forehead.

“Get something to pull out a bullet.”

His voice is rougher now, heavier, that accent thicker. There’s sweat on his forehead, and he’s slumping harder against the doorway.

“B-bullet?” I swallow. “I can call an ambulance. You need a hospital … I can’t just pull out a bullet in here.”

“Either you get the bullet out, or I drag it out myself and shoot you for wasting my time.”

I walk toward the cabinets with hands still raised and pull the drawers open. We’ve got nothing in this room close to what he needs.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “You need surgery. This is a vet clinic. We treat animals, not humans. Wrong species.”

“And you’re a vet?”

“Yes.”

“Then fix me the way you’d fix them.”

I blink because I actually can’t believe this is happening right now—he wants me to dig a bullet out of him? In this room? With no backup, no nurse, no legal protection? I’m not a trauma doctor. If he dies, it’ll be on me somehow. If the last couple of months have taught me anything, it’s that people believe whatever the police write down. Doesn’t matter what actually happened.

I take a shaky breath and start pulling out whatever I can think of. Forceps, tweezers, saline, gloves, gauze, syringe, sponges. It all clatters into a metal tray as I grab and move without thinking.

When I turn around, I freeze. He’s sitting on the floor against the door with the gun still up and eyes on me. There’s so much blood.

I rush to him and drop to my knees. I reach for the gloves, trying to steady my hands as I pull them on, but they won’t stop shaking.

“Lie down, please. I can’t get to the wound with you slumped like that.”

His brown eyes find mine. He looks pale, drained. I didn’t think I’d care, but I do because I don’t want him to die here, not like this.

He hesitates, then pushes off the door and lowers to the floor with a groan. He drags the gaiter down and wipes his forehead.

I look away because seeing his full face makes this more real somehow. I push the soaked fabric up slowly while blood seeps from the wound fast. I press sponges to it, trying to get control.

“I need to stop the bleeding first, then I’ll feel around and try to find the bullet.”

He nods once. “Just get it done.”

My hands hover over the wound. I can’t move while the gun is still pointed at my face.

“Okay,” I say, holding my hands up a little. “I’m really hoping you don’t shoot me in the face while I do this.” I pause. “This is going to sound bad, but I need to put my fingers in you. In the wound, I mean. For the bullet.”

He says nothing, just keeps staring.

“And I really don’t want to die today, okay? I haven’t even done anything with my life yet. I’m a vet, and I don’t even have pets. I don’t own a plant. I haven’t gone anywhere. I’ve never even been to the top of the Empire State Building, and I’ve lived in this city my whole life.” I gawk because he still hasn’t moved the gun out of my face. “I don’t know why I said any of that. I just don’t want you to shoot me.”

His arm lowers, and the gun drops to his side while he stares at the ceiling, breathing slow. “Just stop fucking talking. As long as you don’t give me a reason to shoot you, I won’t.”

Swallowing, I move toward the wound with my gloved hands, fingers hovering for a second before I work on slowing the bleeding with pressure, then press them gently inside. I feel around, trying not to go too deep, trying not to panic. His fists clench beside him, white-knuckled, as I search. I can feel him trying not to react to the pain.

I feel it—hard, small, lodged just deep enough that I might actually be able to grab it.

“Yes, I can get it.”

I grin without thinking. Holy shit, I might actually be able to do this. His eyes flick to mine, then drop to my mouth for a split second.

“Just take it out before I bleed to death. Fuck, would’ve been faster if I did it myself.”

“Maybe do it yourself then,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

I reach for the forceps, press them into the wound, and start working the bullet free. His breathing turns heavier, and he grabs at the fabric of his pants while I try not to look at his face. I’ve done this on dogs, and the principle is the same even if everything else about this is completely wrong.

When the bullet finally comes loose, I stare at the small piece of metal that could have killed him, then drop it into the tray with a metallic clink.

That’s when I realize he’s unconscious. Shit.

I slap fresh gauze over the bleeding and press down hard, then scramble to the cabinets. I grab a suture kit and more wraps before dropping back to my knees and getting to work.

I manage to stop the bleeding, but it takes longer than I’d like. The thread slips more than once because my hands won’t stop shaking, but I get it done stitch by stitch. I actually manage to sew him up while he’s out cold.

I scan the rest of him, trying to catch my breath when I notice there’s blood near his leg too. The fabric’s torn, dark and soaked near the thigh. I grab scissors and carefully cut the pants open. There’s a deep cut running along the muscle. A knife wound, maybe, or glass—the cut is long and messy. I clean it, stitch it, wrap it tight. When I finish, I sit on the floor with legs stretched out and arms limp at my sides.

I should call someone.

I study his face, his breath steady but shallow. Strong jaw. Sharp cheekbones. A tattoo sits beneath his eye near his cheekbone in some foreign writing. I hesitate. I shouldn't be doing this … but I touch the ink anyway, tracing the letters, trying to make sense of them.

Jesus Christ. The man is almost dead, and I'm what? Admiring him?

I take in his completely inked neck, his hands, and his fingers. I remember his entire stomach covered in tattoos when I was stitching him, the way the muscle moved under my hands.

Who is he?

Every part of him looks powerful, dangerous. He's huge, all muscle, and looks terrifying even unconscious. Which makes it worse—my brain decided to notice how attractive he is after he already held me at gunpoint.

I really should call the police right now while he's passed out. It's probably my only chance. I get to my knees and look at him again—but something about the way he's lying there, his body gone slack, makes it harder than it should be. He didn't hurt me, and he could have, and it didn't feel like he wanted to scare me. It felt like desperation, like pure survival instinct.

Why here though? Why not a hospital? Why risk bleeding out in the back room of a vet clinic?

Animals do things out of panic when they're hurt. They lash out and bite. They just know they're in pain and scared and can't think past it. I've never held that against them, and I treat them anyway. I actually can't believe I'm sitting here applying that logic to a man who broke in and held me at gunpoint.

I should be calling someone. I should have done it already. What if saving his life just bought me a few more minutes before he decides I know too much?

One of his hands rests against his side, relaxed now. I spot a ring on his index finger, gold and heavy-looking. I glance up at his face again to make sure he's still out cold. My hand moves before I can really think about it; I reach for the tattooed fingers and turn them gently to get a better look.

The ring is thick with a carved animal in the center, sleeping, with a skeleton key in its mouth. A wolf?

Underneath, there's a line of text, curled and foreign. The same kind of letters as the ones inked under his eye. Is this Russian? On each side of the wolf are stars, eight-pointed and cleanly etched.

I have a bad feeling I just stitched up someone I was never supposed to meet.

Nope, hell no, this is too much. I need to call someone, the police or an ambulance. I don't care what happens after because I should've done it the second he passed out.

What the hell was I thinking? Good job, Kelly, you absolute dumbass.

I start to get up, trying to ease his hand out of mine, but his grip clamps around my wrist.

I freeze with full-body panic and just one single conclusion: I'm going to die because I hesitated. I'm the biggest idiot on the goddamn planet.

He groans and forces himself upright, breathing hard like it hurts but still moving quickly. We're face-to-face on the floor, barely a breath between us.

He's the hottest man I've ever seen in my life. Which is not helpful and actually insane. Jesus Christ. I'm about to get murdered by someone I would definitely make out with in a bar if he wasn't actively trying to kill me.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. I try again. "Um. You. Uh." Great start … I'm really nailing the survival speech.

"You passed out for a few minutes, and I stitched your wounds. You lost a lot of blood, and I had to cut your pants to reach the gash on your leg. You're not going to bleed out if you stay still, but you need to move carefully, or the stitches might open again."

He wraps his fingers around the gun and grabs a fistful of my scrubs with his other hand, yanking me in. The barrel presses hard against my temple while his eyes lock on mine, voice low and rough, pulled straight from whatever hell he just woke up in. "Get the fuck up."

When I swallow and nod, he lets go of my scrubs. I get to my feet slowly, carefully, hands raised as I take a small step back. His eyes track me the whole time. He stands and the gun is already pointed at me again. "How long do I have?" His voice is rough, tight. "How long ago did you call them?"

"What? Who?"

He steps closer, grabs my scrubs again, and yanks me toward him. "Don't play with me." The gun hits my temple. "Fuck it. You're done."

"*Wait*. Wait, I didn't call anyone. My phone is in the office. You can check my pockets." I close my eyes, bracing myself.

Nothing happens.

I open one eye, then both, and he's still staring at me.

"I didn't call the cops if that's what you think. I didn't call anyone because I was too busy keeping you alive. You passed out, I stitched your wounds, cleaned up the blood. Your leg was hurt, and I had to cut your pants to get to it. Then you woke up."

He doesn't say anything, just watches me. I keep my mouth shut this time. He shoves me back and says something—I'm convinced it's Russian—and wipes his forehead with the inside of his elbow.

"Give me your ID."

"What?"

"Your. ID."

I pat down my pockets, but they're empty. "It's in the office. Same place as my phone."

"Take me."

"Okay." I lift my hands again and keep them up as I move past him. He doesn't lower the gun. I just walk slow and take him through the clinic. When we reach the back office, I go to the drawer, pull out my wallet, find my ID card, and then grab my phone and unlock it. I hold them out without saying anything.

"You can check my phone. I wasn't lying. I haven't called anyone."

He takes the ID, still pointing the gun at me. Stares at it for a second. Then he grabs the phone from my other hand and scrolls.

"Kelly Mackey."

"Y-yes."

He pockets my ID card. "I'm keeping this. If you breathe a word of this to anyone, you're dead. Do you understand?"

I nod.

"You're going to clean up all the blood before you call this in. I don't give a fuck what you say to the police. If you don't do exactly what I say, I will come for you. And there is nowhere you can hide from me."

He gives me back my phone, then limps out of the office through the narrow hallway. Glass crunches under his feet as he steps through the mess. The sound fades as he moves further away until I can't hear anything at all.

What the fuck just happened?

My hands go to my chest. I feel myself down to my legs just to make sure I'm still alive. Sweat soaks through my shirt at the collar.

I back up until I hit the edge of the chair and drop into it with my mouth still open. I can’t close it. I just sit there staring at nothing.

Why am I still alive?

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Chapter 2

Alexei

What a fucking disaster.

I sit down with a groan, tilt my head back, and pop two painkillers into my mouth. Then wash them down with a shot of vodka.

I drop my head against the back of the couch. Getting shot in the stomach hurts worse than I expected. I've been shot before but never there. Felt like something ripped open from the inside.

Turns out I can't trust anyone, not even my brothers. I have four of them, and none are useful. Mikhail and Daniil, the younger two, scouted the warehouse and came back whispering about weapons being moved. Not a working brain cell between them. My father sent me to confirm it since apparently suspicion is all they could manage.

In and out, quiet. Get eyes on it, report back, then we move properly. Simple.

Apparently not simple enough because I got shot.

I pull out the ID card. Didn't know anyone worked nights there. Just needed to stop bleeding before I dropped. Passed out anyway, and he still didn't call the cops.

Either he's stupider than he looks, or he's got his own reasons to avoid law enforcement.

His photo's grainy, expression flat, but the dimples are still there. Same ones he had when he smiled after pulling the bullet out of me. His hair doesn't show properly in the picture, but I remember the color—sandy-blonde, a little wavy. Freckles across his face. Eyes bright green that looked like sea glass in the fluorescent lights.

Kelly Francis Mackey. Five-ten, twenty-seven—same age as me.

I snort. What kind of parents name their son Kelly Francis? Sounds like they wanted him to get his ass kicked in school.

I should have killed him. I know exactly how mistakes like him end. That's the truth. I made the call, and now I'm paying for it. I don't leave loose ends. Ever.

Though I can't shake the way he looked at me. The way he showed me something close to kindness while I gave him nothing back.

The front door opens, and I shove the ID into my pocket and get up from the couch with a groan. Everything goes gray for a second. I grip my stomach and limp toward the sound, steadying myself against the wall.

Mikhail and Daniil are late, which pisses me the fuck off. I move down the hall and catch them at the door, kicking off their shoes. Daniil's hunched under his hood, head down. Mikhail doesn't bother looking at me until I'm right there.

One glance and I know. His pupils are blown wide, eyes glassy and red-rimmed.

Mikhail's the most dangerous of my brothers. He has temper issues and zero self-control. The drugs make him unpredictable in the worst way, and right now, he can barely keep his eyes open, which means he was useless on the job that got me shot.

I move toward him, ignoring the sharp pull in my side where the stitches are still healing, and grab the front of his shirt. Then slam him into the wall so hard the mirror rattles next to us. Then I wrap my hand around his throat and pin his shoulders back.

"You were supposed to make sure the warehouse was clear. Instead, I got shot in the stomach. Want to explain that?" I snap.

I let go of him and punch the wall beside him. My knuckles split, and the drywall cracks. He looks at the damage, then back at me, eyes narrowing.

"You got shot?" He blinks. "But you're alive and dramatic as fuck, so what's the actual problem? We checked that place twice. You're standing here yelling at me, so clearly, you're fine."

He tries to shove me back, but I barely move. I go for him again, already swinging, but Daniil's faster and gets between us. He pushes me back, and I toss a glare his way.

Daniil's the only one who doesn't pick fights or run his mouth. He and Mikhail are attached at the hip, always backing each other up no matter

what stupid stunts one of them pulls. They've been like that ever since he was adopted into the family. My father brought him home when he was two, covered in bruises, and wouldn't stop crying. Mikhail latched onto him immediately. Annoyingly inseparable ever since.

"You were supposed to handle the intel," I say, pointing at both of them.

"That was it. One job. I got shot because you fucked it up. It was supposed to be clean. Simple. But you were too high or too distracted or too stupid to do basic recon. So tell me, what exactly did you accomplish? Because I nearly bled out and died."

I pull at my shirt and show them the mess. Blood's already soaking through again. The stitches are useless, the white fabric crimson.

Mikhail scoffs, arms crossed, already defensive. "Why the fuck are you blaming us like we set you up? You think I'd want that? And since when do you not call for backup? That's on you."

I let out a deep sigh. "Because one of the bullets hit my phone and fucking shattered it. I had to run for over thirty minutes with a bullet in my stomach just to get away." I almost start to say more. Almost mention the clinic, but that part's mine, and I'm not telling them about that.

"I don't care how many times you tell me you checked the cameras or verified the rest of the intel. If I end up with a bullet in me, then something went wrong. I don't care whose fault it was. That means you missed it, or someone fed you garbage and you were too stupid to catch it."

Daniil glances between me and Mikhail, chewing at his bottom lip. He opens his mouth, closes it, looks at the floor, and shakes his head.

He's always been like this. Doesn't talk to anyone but Mikhail. Whenever he tries with the rest of us, he can't get a word out without stuttering. I've only heard him speak normally to Mikhail, and that was when he thought no one was listening. He just shuts down. Has since he was little.

"The others can't know. We need to find out more about this before we involve them," Mikhail says before I can speak.

"I'm not telling our father you two fucked up and almost got me killed. Let's be honest, he probably already knows. He always does. He just waits to see who's stupid enough to finally admit it first."

Mikhail groans, tilts his head back, and rubs his face with both hands. "Can you just explain what happened without being a dick about it?"

I feel unsteady. Too much blood loss to stay upright while recounting this bullshit. My hand finds the wall for support as the room tilts slightly. I nod toward the living room and head down the few steps into the sunken part of the room and drop into the couch. I grab the vodka bottle and take a long pull.

“The moment I stepped inside, I knew. Something was off. Should have turned around, but I didn’t. Kept walking like a moron. First foot through the door, they lit the place up. This wasn’t random. They were waiting for me specifically.”

Mikhail shifts forward, elbows on his knees. “We kept it tight, I swear. Only the three of us knew. We didn’t give names, didn’t drop anything to the officers on our payroll. I don’t know how they knew.”

I clench my jaw. “He trusted us to not mess this up. You get that? Do you know what this means for us if he finds out? Someone just made him look weak. He doesn’t tolerate that. Ever.”

Mikhail mutters, “Fuck.”

He grabs the bottle out of my hand, tilts his head back, and drinks, then walks off. I hear him in the hallway a second later, picking up his phone, voice low as he makes a call.

I glance at Daniil who’s about to follow him. I don’t know how he does it, how he puts up with Mikhail without breaking something.

“Wait.”

He stops and looks over his shoulder. His black hair’s a mess under the edge of his hoodie, sticking out in every direction.

I push myself off the couch, biting back a groan, and dig into my pocket. Pull out the ID and hold it out. He takes it, looks at it, and then back at me.

“Get me everything on him. And when I say everything, I mean everything. Where he lives, where he works, his family, school. Tell me his fucking star sign. I want all of it.”

He snaps a picture of the ID and hands it back to me.

Mikhail returns, pocketing his phone. “I called Calder. He’s going to help us. He owes me, and he said he won’t take it to the others.”

Calder and I are my father’s go-to for the jobs he won’t acknowledge. We’re assigned together most of the time. Interrogations, torture, cleanup. Two-man operations that stay off the books. At least Mikhail did something right for once.

Mikhail starts to speak, but I cut him off with a sharp flick of my hand. I'm not in the mood for either of them.

"Save it. Fix this. Text me updates. And Daniil, I want that file in my inbox within the hour. Not later, not whenever you feel like it. One hour."

I limp down the hall with stitches pulling at every step, jaw clenched, vision swimming. I'm over this whole thing. The fact that I trusted these two to not screw up and almost died for it. I should have handled this alone.

DANIIL KEEPS HIS WORD AND SENDS THE FILES WITHIN THE HOUR. I SIT UP against the bed frame, tablet in hand, and open them.

It starts normal. College, veterinary degree, grew up in New York.

His mother died a little over a year ago from breast cancer. His father sold everything after, moved to Vegas, and is drowning in debt now. I blink at the numbers. Not sure how one man racks up that much financial damage by himself in under a year.

Kelly's all alone now. No family to miss him if something happened.

Then it shifts and gets more interesting.

The last six months stand out. His record was clean before that. Perfect little veterinarian with his perfect little life.

Then suddenly he's arrested three times in half a year. Trespassing, disorderly conduct, public intoxication. Not major charges but messy.

On top of that, there's a stack of harassment complaints filed against him. Unpaid fines piling up, enough to seriously fuck with his finances.

He tried to file a restraining order against someone, but it got dropped. No details. Just a dead end in the system like someone reached in and erased it.

Who wanted Kelly's complaint buried?

I don't know him. Don't know anything about him besides the fact that he didn't call the police when he should have. That part's stuck in my head because most people would've called someone the second I passed out.

He didn't. He helped me instead. Patched me up. Let me leave.

Why?

Consider me very fucking interested.

I scroll down the file and come across his work schedule.

Kelly’s working at the clinic two days from now. That gives me exactly what I need. While he’s busy saving strays, I’ll have time to take a look at his place. See what he’s hiding. What he’s running from.

My instincts tell me something’s buried under that gentle exterior. Something dark he’s working hard to hide from everyone.

I’m going to figure out exactly what that is.

I can’t walk away until I do.

I TAP MY FINGERS AGAINST THE STEERING WHEEL AND STARE AT HIS building. Almost eight and Kelly should be on his way to work by now. Which means if he doesn’t leave soon, he’s going to be late.

He lives in a decent neighborhood with clean streets, overpriced coffee shops on the corner. The apartment buildings are pressed tight together. His is red brick, seven floors, old fire escape running down the side. His apartment is on the second floor, according to the file.

Daniil pulled the door code for me last night, so I don’t have to sit here waiting for someone to hold it open like a creep. Though that’s exactly what I’m doing—sitting in my car, watching his door like a creep.

I lean back in the seat and exhale.

The door swings open and drags me out of my thoughts. Kelly steps out with his bike, navy scrubs under a black coat, hair messy from the wind. It’s colder than it should be for late September. He pulls the coat tight around himself while he fumbles with the lock.

He hops on his bike and pedals away. I reach for the passenger seat and hiss when I feel my stitches pulling. I grab my kit, pull my hoodie up, and then I head toward the building.

The whole place smells stale with blue paint peeling off the walls. By the time I hit the second floor, I slow down and glance around.

I knock once, just in case. Although the file said no girlfriend, no roommate, nothing else tied to this address, I’m not about to get jumped by some pissed-off girlfriend with a frying pan.

Nothing.

I use the lock kit, and it takes only seconds before I hear the click. I glance over my shoulder once more, then slip inside and shut the door

behind me.

What the fuck?

It’s a small, empty apartment.

The door leads straight into the living room, and the kitchen is part of it. He has no furniture. The walls are white with three boxes stacked against them. To the right, a small bathroom door’s slightly ajar. I look to the side where there’s another room—probably his bedroom.

Shrugging, I walk toward the kitchen. Take a peek into the fridge. It’s almost empty with only almond milk, some grapes, and butter.

He’s been living here for a couple of months, but he has no food or furniture? No pictures? The place is spotless, overly clean.

His window is unlocked, so I close it, flipping the latch. He’s going to get himself killed leaving it open like that. What if someone dangerous got in?

I step into his bedroom, turn on the light, and spot a laptop on the desk. It’s as good a place as any to start.

The laptop opens immediately. No password, no security, nothing stopping me.

The window was unlocked.

The door took less than twenty seconds.

Now this.

Kelly doesn’t think or perhaps care about security. About who might want access to his life. He stitched me up, sent me on my way, thinking we were done. We’re not.

He’s at work right now with no idea someone’s in his bedroom going through his things. That’s dangerous—the kind of careless that gets people robbed, hurt, killed. He saved my life days ago, and this is how careful he is with his own? I just need to understand why he didn’t turn me in and whether he’s a threat. That’s logical. It has to be.

I comb through his history, his recent searches, and all his files. It’s full of nothing.

I’m so confused. He’s either the most boring person on Earth or he’s hiding something.

Is he a narc? Maybe he works for the police, undercover or something. I make a mental note to get Daniil to search the police databases.

I pause at his recent porn searches, eyebrows lifting. Amateur gay porn. Interesting.

I stare at the screen, and something tightens in my chest. Something I've spent years pretending doesn't exist. I wasn't expecting that. Shouldn't matter. I'm here to check if he's a threat, not to … whatever the fuck this is. My pulse hammers for reasons that have nothing to do with security checks.

I rub my jaw, trying to think clearly.

So aside from his boring porn preferences and the fact that he's clearly gay, all he has is a Netflix account filled with *How I Met Your Mother* and *Friends*, of all things.

No. There has to be something else.

I roll the chair back and accidentally push the laptop, taking in the paper envelopes under it.

So you *are* hiding something.

I almost burst out laughing when I read the first letter, and then the next, and then the next. Twenty letters. All unpaid parking tickets. I throw them onto the desk, and a manic laugh escapes me.

He doesn't even have a car registered to his name, and he clearly rides a bike. How does he have so many fucking unpaid parking tickets then?

The whole thing feels off.

Something happened to him in the past few months.

Something is happening to him right now.

He had no record at all until those three arrests started, and something shifted. That kind of shift doesn't come from nowhere. I'll make it my mission to figure out what's going on with him—and whether he's a threat. Consider it repayment for saving my life.

That thought should terrify me, but it doesn't. It excites me.

I walk over to the dresser, run my fingers over the top, and pull open the drawers. Shirts, underwear, socks. I pinch the fabric. Nothing worth a second look, nothing hidden underneath. Next, I move to the closet and brush my hand along his jacket. A lot of green. Must be his favorite color.

I turn to leave, and the stitches pull, nausea surging as I grab the dresser. I glance at the bed—the indent of his head still marked into the pillow.

I limp over and sink down onto the mattress, press my face into the pillow where his head rested. His scent clings to the fabric. Faint but unmistakable. Something clean, a little sweet.

Just like at the clinic when those green eyes stared at me in pure terror while his hands shook.

I stare at the ceiling and drag my hand over my stomach where the wound still pulls. Everything catches up with me—blood loss, wound, exhaustion. Lying in Kelly's bed feels too good. Part of me wants to just close my eyes and never open them again. Fall asleep and stay asleep. Let the tiredness win. It would be easier than forcing myself to keep going.

I push that thought away and force myself up anyway. Make sure everything looks the same before I leave, then head back to the living room.

The boxes have nothing, just unpacked kitchen items and books.

I flip on the bathroom light and stare at the counter. His toothbrush sits in a ceramic cup, blue with fraying bristles. I trace my finger along the bristles, then set it back down.

The shower curtain's pulled back. Only one bottle on the edge of the tub. I grab the body wash and twist the cap off and bring it to my nose.

Coconut and lime. The same smell from the clinic that night.

The laundry basket's shoved in the corner. I dig through it. Jeans, socks, scrubs. My hand closes around something soft. Worn thin.

Green T-shirt. Faded logo.

I pull it out and sniff it.

The scent hits harder than the bottle. Body wash, yeah, but underneath that is sweat and skin. The way he smelled leaning over me in the clinic. Not soap. Not cologne. Just him.

I shove the shirt inside my hoodie without thinking. Probably just the blood loss making me stupid.

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Chapter 3

Kelly

It's been a week since the stranger broke into the clinic, making me spiral. I keep feeling like I'm being watched, like there's something just behind me when I ride home from work. I keep catching glimpses of the same cars in my peripheral, but I'm not sure. Maybe I'm just losing my mind …

It took me over two hours to clean up the bloody mess and make it look like someone threw a rock through the window. I actually went outside, found a rock, and tossed it on the floor like I was staging a crime scene. My boss bought it though, even mumbled something about how it's time to get cameras installed now.

The paranoia's gotten so bad that I had to break it to Gary that I can't work nights anymore. I told him I'm too freaked out to be here alone right now. He didn't take it well and said I needed to man up, so instead I spent twenty minutes pleading my case, and he finally gave me day shifts. Took bringing up work violations to get him to shut the hell up.

I walk through the hallway toward the kennels. I spot Gary in the lounge and pick up my pace, ducking past before he sees me.

I'm not in the mood for his shit right now. All I want to do is pet the brown lionhead rabbit who's still here.

It's her last day, and she'll be sent off to the shelters and put up for adoption since she was abandoned at our clinic, and we can't keep her any longer.

I feel a weird attachment to her after spending the past week petting her and basically trauma-dumping all my problems on her.

I bite my lip and glance back to make sure it's clear before I walk into the kennels. I almost start to sob at seeing all the animals in here. If I could

start an animal sanctuary, I would. In a heartbeat.

My mom was a vet too and the reason I became one. She told me I had too big of a heart and took pity on things too easily.

I'd adopt every single one of them if I could. Which is also probably why I didn't call the police when that masked man passed out. I actually felt bad for him even though he pulled a gun on me. I'm a disaster. No denying that.

Those deep brown eyes haunt me when I close my eyes. They were so vulnerable even while threatening me. I hope he survives whoever's after him. I searched the letters from his tattoo and think he might be Russian. The family crest on his ring turned up nothing, which makes no sense. Something that elaborate should exist somewhere online.

I keep thinking about him. More than I should.

He's probably long gone by now, dealing with whatever mess he's in. But I can't shake the feeling that someone's out there. Watching. Waiting.

I stop in front of the rabbit's cage and smile down at her before opening it gently. I'd bought her a few extra things—little comforts—so she wouldn't feel so alone with just the basics.

I lift her out, bring her close, kiss the top of her head, and tuck her to my chest, rubbing gently behind her ear.

"It's a pity, huh?"

Startled, I spin around. "Don't sneak up on me, Camilla. You almost gave me a heart attack."

I let out a breath and glare at her. She gives me a sheepish smile. Her black braided hair's up in a loose bun. She's out of her scrubs already, in a long skirt and soft orange top, probably on her way home.

"Sorrrry. I forgot you've been extra jumpy since the whole rock through the window thing."

"It's fine." I glance at the rabbit and give her another kiss. I didn't tell her what actually happened. She would scold me for being so careless.

Camilla walks over and holds her hands out. "Can I?"

I pout and give her over carefully. She pulls the rabbit to her chest and gives her slow, gentle pets.

"Ugh. I wish we didn't have to give her to a shelter," she murmurs. "Maybe we could keep her, like a clinic pet or support animal or something."

“Yeah, because Gary would totally allow that,” I mutter. “You know I had to talk him into letting her stay a few more days? He wanted her sent off right after surgery with her leg still healing and everything.”

She frowns. “I’m not surprised, honestly.”

“I kind of want to adopt her.” I blurt.

Her brown eyes widen. “Oh my god, yes. That would be so perfect for you.” Then she frowns. “Do you think Gary would even allow it?”

I snort. “What if we just say we sent her off to the shelter? I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t even ask for proof. He’s got his head so far up his ass he wouldn’t notice if we replaced her with a damn raccoon.”

She bursts out laughing. “Yeah, you’re right. You can bring her home today. Ooh, wait, I know. I can call over to the shelter and tell them she got adopted by one of us. I know someone who works there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Kelly. This is exactly what you need. I know it’s been a rough year for you, and she’s the kind of comfort that matters. You need something soft right now, and you should let yourself have it.”

It sort of feels sudden, like I’m doing this out of pure impulse. But the break-in last week has me so on edge, and it made me realize life’s too short to keep doubting everything. I want this, and I want to do it.

I rub the back of my neck. “I got an hour left here, but I assume you’re done for the day? Could you maybe go to the pet store and grab a few things for her so I can set her up at home? I want her free-roaming, and I can litter-train her. Rabbits are clean and smart, so it’ll be no problem, I think.”

“This is so exciting. Of course. But I’m also getting a bottle of wine and some takeout, and we’re going to get drunk and celebrate your new tiny roommate.”

I chew on my lip. “Please don’t buy cheap wine. I’ll literally pay for everything. You’re the best.”

She kisses the rabbit on the head and puts her back in the cage. Then she wraps me in a hug. “I’ve known you for years, and I’d do anything for you, you know that, right? I’m really sorry you’ve been going through it. Let’s get drunk, gossip, and build the best bunny palace anyone’s ever seen.”

She leans back, gives me a smile, and I nod.

“There’s a key to my apartment in my locker.”

“Yeah, yeah, see you when you get home. Oh my god, this is so exciting.” She turns and heads out, mumbling to herself on the way to the door.

I turn back and smile down at the cage.

I BORROWED A SMALL CAGE FROM GARY’S CLINIC. WHEN I SAY *BORROWED*, I mean stole.

I push into the building with the cage in one hand and head to my floor. Halfway up, some strange feeling crawls up my spine. As if I’m being watched. I pause on the landing and glance toward the next floor.

For a second, I swear I see someone dressed in black disappear around the corner.

I stand there, staring at the empty stairwell. Nothing. No footsteps. No movement.

I shake my head and keep climbing.

Camilla left the door unlocked, so I walk in, still glancing over my shoulder. The smell of Thai takeout hits me hard and makes my stomach growl.

I haven’t been great at taking care of myself since my mom died. Feels like I’ve been stuck in a loop of grief and survival mode, just going through the motions without really living.

I wish my father still lived close, but grief hit him harder. He sold everything and took off to Vegas like his life was the only one that had been destroyed. Midlife crisis, my ass. He left me with nothing.

Am I bitter toward him? Yeah, I am.

He abandoned me when I lost her too. The difference is I stayed and dealt with the aftermath while he ran. We used to be close when I was growing up.

He was a firefighter and someone I looked up to. I’d visit the station and would climb inside the trucks. I wanted to be a firefighter, until I realized that life wasn’t meant for me. I think those years of seeing trauma at work, and then losing her, just finally made him snap.

My mom was the best parent I could’ve asked for. Kind, supportive, never made me feel like I had to be anyone other than myself. She was the

first person I came out to, and she didn’t even blink, just pulled me into a hug and told me she loved me.

When Camilla’s dad went to jail, and things got bad at her house, Mom let her stay with us without hesitation. That’s just who she was.

Camilla’s been like a sister ever since.

I come to an abrupt stop when I spot her near the moving boxes. Camilla spins around with her hands on her hips. “Okay, no. We talked about this. You need to unpack. This isn’t healthy.”

I roll my eyes and step inside, closing the door behind me. “Don’t start.”

I love her, but Jesus. Not today.

“Mhm. We’re fixing this, Kelly. What a mess.” She waves toward my room. “Tadaaa. Look what I did.”

“Wow. You weren’t kidding about the bunny palace. You really went all out … This is incredible.”

She’s set up a fenced area next to my bed with a pink waterproof mat on the floor, a litter box, bowls, water, toys, and there’s even a tunnel she can crawl through. The whole thing opens up so she can roam if I leave it unlocked.

I grin. “You’re already spoiling her.”

Camilla snorts and walks up behind me. “It’s perfect. And I went to the store, by the way. Your fridge had the nutritional value of drywall, so I bought actual vegetables and food for you.”

She nudges my shoulder, and I grunt, dropping to my knees. I open the cage and let the rabbit into her new setup, then sit back and watch her explore.

“So, what are we naming her?”

Oh right … I hadn’t even thought that far. I scratch the back of my head and try to come up with something. “What about Clover?”

“That’s good. She’s your lucky bunny.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

We end up on my bed with empty Thai containers scattered at our feet and Clover asleep between us. A *Friends* episode plays in the background on my laptop. We haven’t been paying attention for a while since we’ve just been talking. Mostly work gossip, complaining about Gary, laughing. Both of us feeling the slight buzz from the wine.

“You know it’s Friday night,” she says, nudging my knee. “We should go out somewhere, do something.”

“What, like a club?”

“Obviously. Both of us need to get laid, and you’re a great wingman.”

Clubs really aren’t my thing, and I don’t even remember the last time I had a proper night out or drank like this with anyone. It’s been hard letting people in again after everything that happened. It’s like I forgot how to exist without waiting for something to go wrong.

Part of me feels guilty even considering it. Like I don’t deserve to go out and have fun when everything’s still a mess … when *I’m* still a mess.

But maybe that’s exactly why I should go. Maybe I need to remember what normal feels like before I forget completely.

I chew the inside of my cheek. Part of me wants to say no, wants to stay here with Clover and my laptop where it’s safe. But safe hasn’t been working out great for me lately. The break-in was proof enough.

“When’s the last time you even went out?” Camilla asks.

“I don’t know. Almost three years, maybe? Before everything fell apart.”

“Exactly. You need this, we both do.”

“Screw it. Why not.”

She jumps off the bed and rattles off outfit ideas and places we can go while I just sit there and smile at her enthusiasm.

I search for my favorite T-shirt. But I come up empty. I could’ve sworn I washed it last week, but I haven’t been able to find it anywhere. It would go perfectly with the outfit I was planning.

I scratch my head and let out a sigh.

“Is there something wrong?” Camilla asks from behind me.

“Nah, just can’t find something. It’s fine, you can pick my outfit.”

She squeals and shoves me out of the way so she can dig through my closet. I huff and sit on the bed, scratching my neck.

It’s probably a good idea for me to go outside anyway. Clear my head. My brain’s been all over the place lately, and maybe getting out will help. Or at least distract me from spiraling about missing laundry and everything else that’s been going wrong.

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Chapter 4

Kelly

It took us an hour to get ready, and by the time we made it to the club, it was already close to ten. We're somewhere in the middle of a long line outside a recently opened place called Ozero.

It's supposed to be wildly popular right now, and it shows. The line stretches forever. I almost regret my choices and consider walking home and going to sleep already.

It's cold as hell outside. I feel very overdressed in the clothes Camilla picked out for me. Gray chinos, black shoes, and a cream-colored linen shirt with the sleeves pushed up to my elbows.

It's been so long since I went out, I don't even know what people wear to clubs anymore. Camilla said I looked hot though, so I'm trying to believe her.

Someone in a fancy suit steps out of the entrance and walks down the line. He stops right in front of us, like he's been looking for us.

"You two. Come with me."

We glance at each other and then around us.

"Us?" I ask, pointing at my chest like an idiot.

"Yes. Follow me."

Camilla shrugs, and we follow. Groans ripple through the line behind us. We were only out there ten minutes, and some of these people look like they've been waiting forever. I feel like a complete asshole.

Inside, I stop short. This place is nothing like I expected.

The club is massive. Dark wood panels line the walls, glowing warmly under LED strips tucked along the floor.

The whole space pulses with soft light and bass, packed wall to wall with bodies and movement. Music shakes the air like a second heartbeat. Toward the back, the dance floor dips into a sunken pit, lights flashing in sync with the DJ standing above it on a raised stage.

The bar stretches long and polished, backlit shelves stacked high with every bottle imaginable. At least four bartenders move nonstop, sliding drinks across to people shouting orders over the noise.

To the right, a staircase leads up to a VIP level. A man in a black suit stands at its base, arms crossed, scanning the crowd.

This is way fancier than anywhere I've been, and I already feel out of place.

"Wow," I manage.

The man checks his watch, then looks at us like we're wasting his time. "Drinks are on the house. The bartenders know."

He turns to leave, but Camilla grabs his arm. "Wait, why?" Her voice sharpens. "Why are we being let in early? And getting free drinks?"

He sighs. "Boss's orders."

Then he's gone.

"That's weird, right?" I ask.

Camilla squeezes my hand. "Probably. But hey, free drinks, hot crowd, you finally left your apartment. We're not questioning the universe tonight."

She tugs me toward the bar before I can overthink it. I lean close to be heard. "How do they even know who we are? How do they know we're the ones getting free drinks?"

"Let's just enjoy it. Lord knows we need it." She smiles and rests her hand on my arm. "I'll order. You stay here."

She's gone before I can answer. I glance around, overwhelmed by the lights and people, but she returns quickly with a tray of two colorful cocktails and a mess of shots.

I raise my eyebrows. "If you expect me to drink all that, I won't last long. Do you know how long it's been since I had more than one glass of anything?"

She scoffs. "Lightweight."

We set the tray down and start slow, sipping the cocktails and knocking back a couple shots. The music rattles in my ribs. My head starts buzzing pleasantly.

As we head onto the dance floor, the DJ fades into “Alive” by Kx5, and the crowd explodes. Hands in the air. Bodies pressing closer.

I move my hips and take slow sips of my drink, letting the sound get under my skin. Camilla dances beside me, and a tall, muscular guy with tattoos and a buzz cut slips in behind her.

She glances back, shrugs, and keeps dancing. He is insanely hot. I’m happy for her.

Someone bumps my shoulder. I spill a little and turn around, already annoyed. A guy smiles down at me, and something about him makes my skin crawl.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there,” he says, grinning like it’s charming. “Let me buy you another drink.”

“No thanks,” I mutter, turning away.

He grabs my shoulder and spins me around. The rancid stench of alcohol hits my face, and I nearly gag. It triggers something sharp and awful in the back of my brain, and I shake my head, trying to shut it down.

My hands shake, and I take a step back.

But he grabs my shoulders again and pulls me closer. “Come on, don’t be like that. I already got you a replacement.” He nods toward the bar. “Exact same thing you were having. Saw the bartender make it.”

“I just … I’m not interested.”

“What’s the problem? You’re here to have fun, right?” he says, too close now, his breath hot against my ear. “Just one drink with me. That’s all I’m asking. Then we’ll see where the night goes.”

Something about the way he keeps pushing the drink makes my skin crawl, the way he’s standing too close, blocking my path, the way he keeps touching me even when I pull away.

“I said no.” I try to turn away again.

His grip tightens—then suddenly he lets go, eyes wide.

I’m shoved aside, and a man steps in front of me and punches him so hard he hits the floor.

I take a few steps back, heart hammering. Someone must have seen us, decided two guys talking was wrong, and now they’re making an example out of us.

Blood pours from his nose. The man doesn’t stop. He bends down, grabs the guy by the shirt again, and drives his fist into his face. Once. Twice. The third punch makes a wet cracking sound, loud enough that I

hear it over the music. The guy's head snaps back against the floor, blood spattering everywhere.

Fear floods through me, the same kind I felt in high school—cold stares in hallways, whispered slurs behind my back, that look some people get when they've decided you're everything that's wrong with the world. That split second of terror when you realize someone's decided you don't belong, that your existence is somehow offensive enough to warrant whatever comes next.

The guy screams when his wrist twists the wrong way, then goes limp.

People are looking now, staring, but then I notice something else. How fast everyone looks away like they didn't see anything. No one's calling security, no one's moving.

They should be stopping this, right?

The man finally turns around.

Leather boots. Tight black shirt. Blood smeared on his knuckles, tattoos snaking up both arms.

Brown eyes locked on mine. The tattoo under his eye.

It's him.

Fuck. No, no, no. This can't—

I'm going to die.

He's going to finish the job he didn't at the clinic. He probably couldn't pull it off then because he was injured, and now he's here to make sure I don't talk.

I take a few steps back, then take off running.

A hand grabs my shoulder and yanks me back so hard I slam into a solid chest.

"Don't fucking run from me," he breathes against my ear in a thick accent. "Now do as I say and follow me."

I try to search for Camilla, but I don't see her. His hand wraps gently around my wrists. He tugs me forward and starts walking, glancing back to make sure I'm following.

I feel like I'm floating as I trail after him. I keep trying to spot security, someone who might step in, but there's no one.

He leads me to an elevator and pulls out a black card. Scans it. The doors slide open, and he lets go of my wrists, pushes me inside, then follows and hits a button. The elevator starts moving up.

My palms are so slick with sweat that even wiping them on my pants doesn’t help.

The dizziness hits next, chest squeezing tight from fear. What is he going to do with me? Is this how I die? In some fancy elevator, murdered by the man whose life I saved?

I’d laugh if I wasn’t so terrified. Save a bleeding stranger, get murdered by said stranger in some fancy elevator or in a soundproof room.

It’s like the world’s worst karma boomerang. I hope I’m wrong about him. When he was at the clinic, I saw the fear in his eyes, no matter how much he tried to hide it. He was scared of dying, and that alone proves he has some humanity. But that doesn’t mean he won’t kill me.

The elevator ride feels endless, and it’s only making my thoughts spiral even more.

What if no one will ever find my body? Camilla doesn’t even know where I went. She’ll think I just disappeared, maybe that I finally snapped and ran away from everything.

No one will ever know what actually happened to me.

The elevator dings, and he steps out. His cologne lingers, and damn, it smells good. I chew on my lip and follow, hating myself for even noticing.

The city skyline spreads out in the background with floors of black marble, polished so smooth I can see the lights bouncing off them. The walls are dark wood with soft golden lights glowing along the edges.

The hallway stretches ahead in a T-shape. He takes the left, and I trail after him.

A woman approaches us, says something to him in Russian. He nods once and keeps moving. When he reaches a door, he holds it open for me. I freeze for half a second, swallow hard, then step inside.

It’s a big office with glass windows on one side, a wall of bookshelves behind a dark wooden desk, and two black chairs in front of it. He brushes past me and lowers himself into the chair behind the desk, then lifts his hand and gestures for me to sit.

“Please don’t kill me, I did everything you said.”

His face gives away nothing. “I am not going to kill you, Kelly.”

My name in his mouth makes my stomach drop. He grabbed my ID card that night, looked at it, then basically told me he’d kill me if I didn’t do what he said.

He’s known my name this whole time. Probably knows where I live too.

Which means—he didn’t just randomly show up here tonight. He came looking for *me* specifically. Christ, I’m so screwed.

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Chapter 5

Alexei

Should have admitted I was lying when I told myself I could be normal about this. A week of following him everywhere, watching every moment of his day. I've memorized the face of every man who's looked at him twice and just broke the nose of the one who touched his arm.

My version of interest looks a lot like stalking.

Semantics.

The second I saw him walk into the club my family owns, I couldn't stop myself. Too easy to get him into the club, to get Mikhail to pull his girl off to the side so I had room to move in.

Now Kelly's sitting in front of me, chewing his lip bloody, looking at me like I'm about to rip his throat out. Questioning me with his eyes. His sandy-blonde hair curls from the sweat on his forehead, green eyes locked on mine. He looks good in what he's wearing tonight. Too good.

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop thinking about it. *Focus*.

I need to know everything about him. Need the truth. To crack him open and figure out what he is involved in.

"If you're not going to kill me, then what do you want?" he asks.

"What are you involved in? Your file doesn't show you as an informant, so why didn't you call the cops when I passed out?"

His brows pull tight, and he looks confused. "What? I'm not involved in anything. Why would you think that? And wait, file? What file?"

"Answer the question."

He opens his mouth, then shuts it again. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just a vet. I work at a clinic. That's it."

"You are lying."

“I’m not—” His voice cracks slightly, and he clears his throat. “I’m not lying. I swear.”

I don’t buy it.

He sighs. “Oh my god. Is this a joke? Are cameras about to come out and tell me I’m being punked right now?” He laughs nervously, looks around, then freezes. “Right?”

I stare at the shape of his mouth, the way he moves.

“Tell me what you’re involved in.”

“This isn’t a joke?”

“No.” My voice stays flat. That seems to scare him more than yelling would.

“Well, if you want answers from me, then I want answers too.”

I rub my jaw. “Fine. Truth for truth.”

“Okay. Sure. I want to start.” He swallows, then locks those green eyes on me like he’s trying to be brave.

“What’s your full name?”

That’s the first thing he asks? Out of all the questions? I almost laugh. It’s fucking boring, and he could have asked me anything.

“Alexei Romanovich Avrorin.”

His nose scrunches. “That’s Russian, right? I tried to search the letters on your tattoo online.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s my turn.”

He closes his eyes for a second and nods.

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“I honestly don’t know. I wanted to, but you were passed out, and I felt kind of bad calling them on you when you hadn’t really done anything. You know how animals sometimes do stuff when they’re scared, out of desperation? I kind of compared it to that.”

He felt bad? That’s why he didn’t call the cops? I pulled a gun on him, shoved him, and he’s sitting here telling me he pitied me like I was some cornered fucking dog.

I’m out of words, and that’s a rare thing.

Who actually feels bad about reporting an armed man who broke into their clinic? Kelly Mackey is not a human being. No chance. He’s some kind of robot someone forgot to program correctly.

“What happened to you that night? Why didn’t you go to a hospital?”

“That’s two questions.”

“Please.”

Fuck.

“What happened doesn’t matter. It’s being handled. And hospitals weren’t an option. I was losing too much blood. Needed the bullet out immediately.”

His eyes flick to me, then lower, scanning some of the Russian text on my arms, tracing over the patchwork ink. He stares too long at my hand tapping the table.

I’ve already given him two answers in one.

Something happened. I want it.

“Kelly.” My tongue drags across my lip.

His eyes snap to the movement, then meet my eyes.

I rub at my forehead, then just go for it. “What happened to you? Why the sudden record after a lifetime of staying out of trouble?”

His body turns rigid, and color drains from his face. “I’m not answering that. Please don’t make me answer that.”

“Thought we had a deal. Truth for truth.”

“Please take me home.”

So that’s off-limits. He won’t even look at me anymore. Irritation twists sharply in my gut. What happened to him?

I tap the table once. “Fine. You can ask me another question, then I’ll drive you home.”

His head jerks toward me, but he still won’t meet my eyes. “Are you mixed up in something? I mean, bad stuff. Crime. Because you got shot, and normal people don’t just get shot.” He frowns. “You’re not a cop, are you? Or like, I don’t know, a criminal or mafia or whatever. Like Capone.”

It takes everything in me not to react to that. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Like I’m some stupid cartoon character with a tommy gun and a fedora.

“No. I’m not a cop.”

“But the other thing?”

I lean back in my chair and study his face. He’s scared but trying not to show it, even though his hands are shaking. “What do you think, Kelly?”

How do you tell someone that your family built the Russian underworld? That the Avrorin name goes back generations, that we didn’t just join the *vor v zakone*; we helped create it.

My ancestors wrote the codes others still follow.

When my father moved us here, I was ten. He didn't abandon what we had in Russia. He expanded it, took centuries of power, and planted it in American soil.

I don't just solve problems for my family. I prevent them. People call me an enforcer, a cleaner, a spy. They think they understand what that means. They don't.

I've done things that would make career killers lose sleep. Things that keep this empire running smooth and quiet, the way he wants it. The way it has to be.

"The truth is always worse than what you think. Now get up."

I got what I needed, and this should end here. I should drop him off and never see him again.

"Wait—"

When I walk out, he scrambles after me, his shoes scuffing the hallway as he catches up just as I press the elevator button. He doesn't say anything at first, just stands there glancing at me, then back to the floor. When the doors open, I step in and hit the button for the garage.

He hesitates again, then follows.

The second the doors open, he stops hard. "I've never seen cars like this. Not in real life. Only in movies. What is this place? Do you work here?"

I keep walking while he's staring around the garage.

His gaze lands on my black Aston Martin Valiant parked in the corner.

"I don't work here," I say flatly. "My family owns this entire building and the club."

"Oh. Right."

I walk to my car and open the door for him. "Wait. Wait, did you get us through the line? I came here with someone. I forgot all about her."

So many questions.

I glance at him. "She's fine. Text or call her."

He fumbles for his phone and walks a few steps away, putting it to his ear. I stay by the door, still holding it open. He comes back a minute later, looking guilty.

"She said it's fine. She met some guy who wants to take her home."

Fucking Mikhail. I told him to distract her for *five* minutes, not take her home.

"Get in," I say, nodding toward the car.

He climbs in slowly. I shut the door, circle around, slide behind the wheel. His fingers are already on the dash inside the car, tracing across it wide-eyed. The engine kicks on, the sound slamming around the concrete walls.

He jumps, doesn't even buckle. I lean across the console and grab the belt.

He smells like coconut-lime soap, the same scent that clings to his pillows. I snap the buckle in and pull back fast, jaw tight. Men are forbidden. My family's made that clear. I buried that want so deep I stopped noticing it was there. But I'm noticing now.

Each time I press the gas, he grips the door handle tighter, knuckles white. "Christ," he says, voice strained. "Please don't drive so fast."

I push harder on the gas just to hear him gasp a little more.

He finally looks at me, frowning. "Wait, I never told you where I live."

No. He didn't.

I've been inside his apartment every time he's left for work and know the spices he never uses sit in the left cabinet in the kitchen. Towels on the second shelf in the bathroom. Living room window on the fire escape doesn't lock properly. Three pairs of scrubs in rotation. He leaves at the same time every morning since switching off night shifts, green backpack over his shoulder, riding that bike that's one flat tire from the junkyard.

I'm past the point of normal when it comes to him. Way past.

I hit play on "Kosandra" by Miyagi and Andy Panda and let the music drown out the quiet.

I keep one hand on the wheel and take the turns faster before I can think too much about it.

He doesn't ask again and stays quiet most of the ride, watching the road, holding his breath every time I cut across lanes.

He really isn't street-smart. He got in the car with me after I pulled a gun on him the first time we met. Has no idea what kind of man he just trapped himself in a car with. What kind of person does that?

Someone who sees the best in people even when they shouldn't. Someone who's going to get himself killed if I'm not watching.

I can't make sense of him. Can't decide if it's naivety or something worse. Maybe he has a death wish. Maybe he's running from something and doesn't care what catches him.

Doesn’t matter. This really should be the last time I see him. Drop him off, drive away, let him disappear into his normal life while I go back to mine.

I turn onto his block and pull into the same spot I’ve used every night for the past week. The one with the clear sight line to his window. The one where I can see when his lights go off at night.

“Yeah, not creepy or anything that you know where I live or whatever, but um, thanks for driving me home.”

He has no clue.

I nod, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel.

He waits like he thinks I’m going to say something else, but when I don’t, he sighs and reaches for the door handle.

I grab his wrist. He flinches, confused, a little scared.

“Give me your phone.”

“What? Why?”

“So I can put in my number.”

He hesitates, then pulls out his phone. I take it and add my number, sending myself a text so I have his contact. Even though I already do. I’ve had his number saved for a week. Pulled it from the clinic records the day after I met him.

“If you ever need anything or get into trouble, call me.”

He doesn’t move for a long moment. Then his hand covers mine on the console, and my gaze snaps to his mouth, catches on his lip between his teeth, then drops to his hand covering mine.

His thumb shifts against my fingers, brushing over my tattoos.

Wrong. So *wrong*. I can’t move, can’t breathe. My chest feels clogged. I hate the way it sparks through me, hate that I don’t rip my hand back, hate that a touch this soft can hold me completely still.

I’m terrified of how much I want more. I’ve been stabbed, shot, beaten half to death. None scared me like this does. Because those wounds close eventually. This one just keeps getting deeper.

He opens his mouth and then closes it. My eyes snap up to his.

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you lived. I was wondering—I mean, there was so much blood, and I thought that maybe you died after you left.”

His voice does something to me. Soft, genuine concern I don’t know what to do with.

“I didn’t.”

He bites his lip, and I track the movement. “Yeah, I can see that now.” He pauses. “Did you at least get checked out?”

I shake my head.

“Oh.” He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up. A strand of hair falls across his forehead. “Let me guess, you just went home and hoped for the best?”

I don’t answer. That’s exactly what I did. The silence stretches. His hand is still covering mine, warm and solid. I should pull away.

“But you are okay though, right? I mean, that was a lot of blood for one person to lose. You could’ve gone into shock or had organ damage.”

“I’m fine, Kelly.”

He gives me a sad look, and I don’t know what to do with it. Why does he give a shit if I lived or died? We’re strangers. He should want me dead after what I did, not sitting here relieved I survived.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and the spell shatters. I tear my hand back so fast it nearly slams into the steering wheel.

“I need to take this.” I glance at the screen, and Daniil’s name lights up.

I don’t look at him when I speak. “Keep your mouth shut about tonight.”

Then I glance at him anyway. He nods and leaves the car.

I press the phone against my forehead while it’s still vibrating and tap it there once, twice.

I answer just before it stops ringing. “This better be fucking important, Daniil.”

He struggles to get the words out, stuttering through whatever he’s trying to tell me.

Fuck. I shouldn’t have snapped at him.

If he’s calling instead of texting, something’s really wrong. Or he screwed up tonight, and I’m going to lose what’s left of my patience.

I soften my voice. “Text me what you want to say, and I’ll respond here.”

The line goes quiet except for his breathing. I can hear him moving around, probably typing on his phone. My phone buzzes with a text a few seconds later.

“I got it,” I say into the phone. “Let me read this, and I’ll tell you what we’re going to do.”

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Chapter 6

Alexei

I sit in an old, beat-up gray Toyota across from Kelly's clinic, in one of the cars we keep for when we need to stay invisible. No tint, no features worth noticing. Smells like old sweat and cardboard, and the seat's worn down to nothing.

Should have known better than to think I could just drop him off and walk away clean.

Four days since I left him outside his building, and I'm already back here, engine cold, watching him through windows.

So much for self-control.

I've shown remarkable restraint by staying out of his apartment since I dropped him off. Haven't been inside once. That's progress.

That doesn't mean I've stopped watching—just from a distance now.

Daniil had a breakdown that night, blowing up my phone with frantic texts about Mikhail not coming home. The two of them have serious attachment issues, and no one in this family has ever dealt with any of it properly.

But here I am, proving we're all the same brand of broken. Sitting in a surveillance car, cataloging the life of someone who doesn't know I exist outside of two strange nights.

I've gone through everything I can access: his apartment, his clinic file, every digital trace he's made in the last year.

I've counted the steps from his bedroom to his kitchen. Ten steps; eleven if he avoids the squeaky floorboard. I know his coffee order, his grocery list, the fact that he owns three books and hasn't opened any of them.

I know everything.

Except the one thing that matters.

Something big happened, enough to make him file a restraining order, but I can't find a name attached to it. Not even a redacted alias or case number. Nothing on record anywhere.

Someone erased Kelly's past, and I don't know who or why.

That's what's eating at me. Someone else knows his secrets, and I don't.

I know too much and not enough at the same time. Every move, every detail, every pointless habit mapped out in my head, and it's still not enough. It's rotting a hole in my skull, and I can't stop myself from sitting here watching him every day.

Consumed. That's what this is.

I press my tongue against my teeth and let out a laugh that doesn't sound right even to me.

I need sleep. If I don't shut my eyes soon, I'll start seeing him even when he's not there.

He walks out the clinic door, pulling on a jacket over his navy scrubs. It's eleven a.m. He isn't done working. His shift doesn't end until five, and he never leaves early, never breaks routine unless something's wrong.

Where are you going?

I pull my hood up and get out of the car. Rain hits my face, and I'm already moving, crossing the street to follow him. Some asshole in a sedan nearly clips me, and I flip him off.

Kelly's half a block ahead, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders hunched against the weather.

He turns into the supermarket on the corner, and I give him twenty seconds before I follow.

This is unusual. He usually stays at the clinic, eats whatever he packed that morning, works through lunch because he won't say no when someone brings in a sick animal.

I stay tucked near the entrance, watching. His sandy-blonde hair is damp from the rain, sticking to his forehead. His cheeks are flushed pink from the cold, and he keeps licking his lips. They glisten every time he does it, and I track the movement without meaning to. Fuck.

He pulls coins out of his pocket. Counts them. Scratches the back of his head and glances around, quick nervous movements, then takes off toward

the back of the store. Grabs a banana from the discount bin, nearly black on one end, then a protein yogurt after checking the price tag twice.

That's all he's getting. A bruised banana and yogurt because he's counting pocket change to afford lunch.

I could fix this. One transfer and he'd never have to choose the cheapest option again, never have to count coins in a grocery store. But that would require explaining how I know everything about his financial struggles, and we're not there yet.

I'm still watching him when someone walks into him, hard enough that Kelly almost falls. The banana drops. His back slams into the shelf, and his hands fly up instantly, defensive, bracing for a hit.

The guy shoves Kelly's shoulder again. "Watch where you're fucking going, man."

I curl my hands into fists in my pockets.

That motherfucker.

Kelly looks at the floor, picks up the bruised banana. Rubs his back. Won't look up. I bite the inside of my cheek as the asshole snaps something else at him, then walks away.

Kelly walks toward the register to pay, but I don't follow. Can't. If I get any closer right now, I'll do something he'll see.

So, I go hunting instead.

The piece of shit is just two aisles over, standing in front of the cereal, trying to decide between boxes. I close the distance, smooth and quiet. Grab a fistful of his hair. He starts to turn, mouth opening, and I slam his face into the metal shelf edge. Hard.

The crunch when his nose collapses is satisfying and immediate. He grunts, as if dazed, and his legs give out. Blood pools under his cheek, spreading toward a box of cereal.

I spot the wet floor sign a few feet away. Walk over, pick it up, bring it down on his ribs three times.

These stores really need to be more careful about mopping when they're still open.

Wet floors are dangerous. Man slips, hits his head wrong, stops breathing. Tragic accident. Happens more than people think.

I drop the sign next to him and walk away.

By the time I make it back to the front, Kelly's already gone. I spot him half a block down, heading toward the clinic. Bruised banana in one hand,

yogurt in the other. He ducks inside, and the door swings shut behind him. Oblivious.

I head back to my car. Rain soaks through my jacket. The phone buzzes in my pocket. I drag it out, jaw already clenching.

Group Chat: screwups

MIKHAIL:
added Daniil, added Alexei

MIKHAIL:
Welcome to the screwup club big bro

DANIIL:
He’s leaving in 5 seconds

MIKHAIL:
Already typing some angry response guaranteed

ME:
What the fuck do you idiots want?

MIKHAIL:
CALLED IT

MIKHAIL:
Calder wants us at the warehouse. Port side. Says he has something

MIKHAIL:
Probably bodies but who knows with that lunatic

DANIIL:
The big one on Halperin

MIKHAIL:
Yeah obviously Danya which other warehouse would he use?

MIKHAIL:
Also fathers being weird. I think he knows about what happened

ME:
Knows what?

MIKHAIL:

That you got shot dumbass

MIKHAIL:

He’s asking questions

DANIIL:

Stop texting about this

MIKHAIL:

Relax nobody’s reading our texts

MIKHAIL:

Right Alexei???

ME:

You’re both idiots

MIKHAIL:

Cool see you in 20

I sigh and rub my forehead, already picturing exactly what’s happening. They’re probably sitting next to each other right now with their phones out, typing like assholes.

Mikhail kicking Daniil under the table, him pretending to ignore him while typing exactly what Mikhail tells him to. Both of them trying to get a rise out of me like when we were kids, except now it’s not about stolen candy or broken windows.

I curse and toss my phone onto the passenger seat. I lean back and try to breathe, but it sticks halfway down my throat.

I put the car in drive and pull away from the curb. The warehouse Mikhail’s talking about is down by the port we control. Calder’s favorite spot when he needs privacy. Bad news for whoever’s inside.

Our family runs that entire port.

We oversee shipments, keep the smaller families in line, take orders straight from Father. On paper, it’s a legitimate shipping company with a long-term lease, clean and legal. No one looks twice at the paperwork.

In reality, nothing gets in or out without us knowing about it first. Guns, stolen cars, crates with no names attached. It all passes through our hands before it goes anywhere else. Doesn’t matter who signed for it or whose name’s on the official documents. If it hits that dock, it belongs to us until we decide we’re done with it.

I don’t know what Mikhail’s talking about, saying Father’s acting suspicious.

Unless they talked recently. Which means Mikhail probably fucked up. Again. He can’t keep his mouth shut, can’t just answer simple questions without volunteering extra information. Tries to explain things that don’t need explaining, fill silence that should stay empty.

Father notices everything. Every pause, every word that doesn’t belong, every time someone tries too hard to sound normal. And Mikhail always tries too hard.

If the old man suspects something, it’s because Mikhail gave him a reason to.

I PARK BESIDE DANIIL’S UGLY-ASS PURPLE MCLAREN AFTER CLEARING THE security gate. Still can’t understand why he picked that color out of every option on Earth.

I glance out the window and see them inside the car talking with their hands flying around like they’re mid-argument.

Figures. I kill the engine and step out.

The second my door slams shut, I hear theirs pop open too. Footsteps crunch across the gravel behind me, and someone grabs my shoulder.

“Don’t,” I say.

Mikhail freezes. “What if Calder mentions something to the others?”

“He won’t. He’s loyal to everyone in the family and keeps everyone’s secrets. That’s why we all trust him.”

Mikhail scoffs and moves past me toward the warehouse. “Pretty sure Father already knows anyway.” He drags a hand over his buzzed head, his blue eyes flicking my way.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I mutter and shoulder him hard as I pass. He stumbles a little, and a string of Russian curses hits my back, but I don’t turn around. My lips twitch with amusement.

The warehouse is massive. Gray metal exterior, loading bays along the side, big enough to take direct shipments off the water. I head toward the side door we use for family business.

Before I reach it, I glance back. They're still in the parking lot. Mikhail's shaking his head, all wound up. Daniil has a hand on his arm, trying to calm him down like always. Fuck, I love getting him riled. He's always had a short fuse. The drugs just make it shorter.

I walk in and cut across the warehouse floor. None of the workers look at me directly, just keep their heads down and focus on their tasks. At some point, my brothers catch up with me. We take the freight elevator down to the basement where we handle interrogations.

The room opens up, and Calder's there, crouched in front of some guy who's bound and gagged in a metal chair.

He glances over when he hears us approach and smirks at us.

Even I can't stand looking at him for too long. He doesn't have to try to unsettle people, but he does it anyway, like he enjoys watching them squirm under his attention.

His tattoos leave almost nothing untouched on his body. Arms, chest, crawling up his throat and across his jaw, ink etched into the skin of his forehead, and down the back of his shaved head. And then those eyes—dark brown, so dark they look wrong on his pale face.

My older brother Yulian is the reason this lunatic started working for our family. Found him homeless after he got out of the Navy and offered him work instead of leaving him to rot. Turned out to be the best decision he ever made. Calder's competent, loyal, enjoys the work too much to ever complain. My mother treats him like he's one of her sons. I think she secretly wishes he was.

I stop in front of the man in the chair. Gagged, arms tied behind him, ankles bound to the chair legs.

Blood's already dried on one side of his neck where Calder's been working on him. Calder stands up slowly. "Look what I caught for us," he says, grinning. "One of Nozares's men. The warehouse where you got shot. His operation."

The Nozares family has been testing boundaries for the past few months, but there are decades of bad blood between our families. They have old, sloppy structure, but they're not stupid enough to move on us without reason. Their boss is pushing seventy and should know better.

Problem is, his cousin Omar Nozares runs Mexico and Cuba, and that psychopath doesn't follow anyone's rules but his own. Every other family in the city keeps their distance from our business.

The Nozareses are either desperate or the old man is losing his grip.

My father doesn't want war. He wants order. When he finds out someone just tried to kill his son, that's personal, and he takes it very seriously.

I don't recognize this guy though. Late forties, light stubble along his jaw.

"I haven't really started yet," Calder says, eyes still fixed on the man. "According to my intel, he was at the warehouse the night you got shot. So go ahead, sit. I'll get us some answers. Won't take long. They never last as long as they think they will."

Calder steps behind the guy and yanks the gag off. The man coughs hard, then immediately starts screaming.

"Help! Please! Help me, somebody help—"

Calder's face lights up with the manic expression I've seen too many times.

The screaming drills into my skull. I slam my fist into the guy's face, feeling his nose collapse. Blood sprays across his shirt. He jerks back in the chair, wheezing through the mess.

"Shut up," I snap. "No one's going to hear you anyway."

His breathing turns wet and ragged, but the following silence is better.

"Fuck, I love it when they start strong," Calder says, cracking his knuckles. He grips the man's shoulders. "Makes the whole process more authentic. If I start with the smaller bones and work my way up, I can keep him talking for hours. It's about finding the right rhythm, you know? Watching it all unfold."

Behind me, Mikhail laughs. He slumps into one of the metal chairs by the wall, the chair creaking under his weight. Daniil walks in after him and drops into the next seat, pulls one leg over the other, reaches into his hoodie, and pulls out a bag of chips.

The guy opens his mouth again, voice cracking. "Please, please don't kill me. I have a wife and kids. They need me."

Calder frowns, genuinely disappointed. "But where's the fun in that?" he says, tone flat. "I was just getting warmed up."

He walks around the chair and crouches in front of the bound man, looking up at his face. Then he glances at me for permission. "Did you know if you hit a kneecap at just the right angle, it pops exactly like bubble wrap? I love that sound. So satisfying."

I shrug. “Sounds exciting. Show us.”

I walk over to the chairs and drop into the one next to Daniil. Calder starts working. The screaming picks up fast, echoing off the concrete walls.

Daniil elbows me and holds out the bag of chips. I grab a handful and toss a few into my mouth, the crunch barely registering over the screaming.

It takes about twenty minutes before the guy completely breaks. “I’ll t-tell y-you everything,” he chokes out. “P-pplease. J-jjust s-sstop.”

Calder steps back and wipes his hands on the blood-stained apron. “Disappointing,” he mutters to himself.

I drag a chair in front of the man and sit down. He’s shaking so bad the metal rattles against the concrete floor. Blood drips down his nose, smearing across his lips in thick streaks.

“Talk,” I say, pointing at him. “But if you scream one more time, I’ll make sure you feel every single second of what comes next.”

“We …” He coughs, thick and wet, blood coming up fast. He spits it onto the floor and tries again. “W-we only knew someone was going to show up at the w-warehouse.”

He starts wheezing, coughing harder like his lungs are filling up.

“*Da*, I already figured that out. You’re boring me.”

He sucks in air. “Santiago Nozares has a retired detective on his payroll. He’s been watching your family for him. Said someone from the Avrorin family was going to come to that warehouse. That’s all I know, please.”

He coughs again, and more blood spatters the floor.

I look at my brothers. “A retired detective?” I blink and rub my jaw once. “This is bigger than we thought. We need to involve Father.”

I stand so fast the chair tips back and hits the floor with a clang. Mikhail stands too and walks over, staring at what’s left of the guy.

“But—”

“Grow the fuck up, Mikhail. It’s time to take this to our father. If Santiago Nozares is planning a move on our territory, then this has to be brought to the table.”

Mikhail groans and palms his face. Then he walks back and kicks the side of the chair so hard the guy tips over and smacks the concrete. He starts screaming again.

“I told you screaming would make it worse.” I bring my boot down on his face. Bone cracks under the first hit, but I don’t stop.

I do it again and again. My boot slams through cartilage, skull, skin, until it’s not recognizable as a head anymore. Just a pulped mess spreading across the floor in red and gray chunks. It coats the sole of my boot, splashes up the hem of my pants, soaks into the cracks in the concrete. I keep going until there’s nothing left to break, until all I feel is soft tissue and fluid under my foot.

Most people see a dead body and feel something. Fear, disgust, horror. I see Tuesday’s problem solved. Death is just business, and I’ve been in business too long to pretend it bothers me.

There are people who get to be good. Who get second chances and clean slates. I get the weight of every life I’ve taken and the knowledge that I’ll take some more. The blood doesn’t wash off because it was always supposed to be there. It came with my last name.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead and glance at Mikhail. “Call Father.”

Now, all I want is to get back to that street across from Kelly’s apartment, see if the hallway light’s on, if he’s asleep, if he’s safe. I can’t stop wanting it, needing it like oxygen.

It makes me sick how much I need to see him.

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Chapter 7

Kelly

I rub Clover's ears and boop her nose. She doesn't even twitch. We're sprawled on my bed; my favorite show running in the background while I pretend it's helping me de-stress from the long day.

It's not working though; I can't stop thinking about Alexei since he dropped me off at my apartment. The way he looked at me when I held his hand, I swear he wanted it, wanted me. But there's something deeper under the surface that makes this complicated.

He's involved in something I should stay far away from, that much is obvious. And he's not out, not even close. If he even is gay or bi or whatever—then he's shoved so far in the closet he probably doesn't even admit it to himself.

I'm the one who clammed up when he asked what happened to me. I can't even say it in my own head, let alone out loud.

How do you tell someone you were pathetic enough to stay with someone who hurt you? That you're still trying to remember what it feels like to not constantly brace for impact?

A sudden knock at the door makes me sit up so fast it jolts Clover. She scrambles upright with her ears back, looking around like she's ready to run for cover.

"My bad, sorry," I mutter and pet her, trying to calm her down.

Who the hell would be at my apartment right now? Nobody knows where I live except Camilla.

Another knock comes, louder this time. My throat goes dry because the last time someone knocked unexpectedly, it was two cops arresting me.

"Kelly?" That heavy Russian accent.

What the fuck.

What is he even doing here? My hand shakes as I slide the bolt and pull the door open. Alexei fills the doorframe, and my brain short-circuits.

He's wearing leather boots, black jeans, white shirt stretched tight across his chest, and a black leather jacket. His hair is perfect and slightly damp. The stubble's longer than the last time I saw him. Every detail punches me in the gut and reminds me how out of my league he is.

He lifts an eyebrow. "Can I come in?"

I scratch at my head and nod, stepping aside so he can pass. My brain still can't wrap around why he's here at my apartment. We're not friends, we don't even really know each other. The only reason I know his name is because he broke into my clinic, held me at gunpoint, and then basically kidnapped me from a club. And a part of me is still drawn to him. I'm definitely losing it.

He steps inside, and I shut the door behind him. As he moves about into the living room, I take in the mess scattered across the floor.

Boxes half-open, stuff everywhere from when Camilla and I started sorting through things the other day. We ended up going out instead, and I never finished cleaning up. Now it just looks like I live in complete chaos. My stomach twists. This is so embarrassing.

"What are you doing here? How did you even know which apartment is mine or what floor I live on?"

He stops moving and looks over at me, and something's definitely off. I can feel it radiating from him like heat. There's an edge to his posture, anger maybe, or irritation, like something happened before he came here.

He opens his mouth like he's about to answer, but a rustle sounds from my bedroom. His head snaps toward the sound, and before I can explain, he's already moving down the hall toward my room.

Okay, sure, help yourself to a tour of my apartment …

I almost slam into his back when he stops in the doorway. Clover's rolling onto her side, scratching at her fur with her back leg.

"Is that a rabbit?" His thick accent almost makes me laugh despite everything. I bite my cheek to keep it in.

"Yeah. I adopted her a few days ago. Her name's Clover."

He looks back at me, standing close enough now that I can smell his cologne. There's something that almost looks like concern across his face. I

can’t read the expression properly, but I wonder what the hell happened to bring him to my door tonight.

“Alexei, what are you doing here? You’re supposed to text me, not just drop by. And you can’t just walk into someone’s home uninvited.”

He licks his lips. “I don’t know why I’m here.” He drags a hand over his damp hair, then looks at me; I can’t decipher his expression.

“Is something wrong?”

He shakes his head once, but the tension in his shoulders says otherwise.

“Okay, then why are you here? Really? Why did you want to see me? We’re not friends.”

Clover makes another rustling sound, and his head whips toward her.

“Do you want to hold her?”

He shakes his head. “*Nyet*. I don’t want to accidentally hurt her.”

What does that mean?

“If you sit on the bed, I can give her to you. She’s not fragile, and you won’t hurt her.”

I have no idea what I’m doing right now. Why am I offering this dangerous man a spot on my bed and a chance to pet my rabbit? My life has taken such a strange turn since the day he walked into my clinic that I don’t even recognize it anymore.

He looks at me with something that almost passes for vulnerability, then crouches and unties his boots. He slips them off, walks over to the bed, and sits carefully on the edge.

I pick Clover up and carry her over, holding her out to him. Our fingers brush when he takes her from me. My eyes flick up to find his already watching my face. Heat crawls up my neck. I step back quickly, rubbing the back of my head like that’ll somehow cover my reaction.

He lowers his gaze to Clover, handling her with careful, almost tentative movements. She sniffs at him, twitching her nose in curiosity.

My chest feels like it’s folding in on itself watching this. This terrifying Russian is sitting on my bed, looking uncertain about how to hold a small rabbit. My heart aches for him in a way I probably shouldn’t allow. He doesn’t look like someone who has real friends. The life he lives must be incredibly lonely.

He’s not trying to hide what he is. I know he’s dangerous, and I can feel it radiating from him every second I’m with him. But all I keep thinking is

that maybe underneath all that violence, he's also just alone. Just like me … Am I seriously painting a sympathetic picture of someone who could be a serial killer? Apparently so.

I move across the bed slowly, watching his reaction to see if he's okay with me getting closer. He doesn't react or seem to care, so I join him and lean against the headboard.

"I didn't know rabbits were so soft and could be so—how do you say … fluffy?"

I smile. "Yeah, she's a special breed. Lionhead. They get that fluff around the ears and face. Kind of ridiculous, but they're actually smart and make good pets."

He nods and scratches behind her ears with gentleness. Clover flops down right on his lap, legs stretched out and eyes half-lidded. I guess she feels sorry for him too.

Both of us are pathetic since I'm imagining what it would feel like if he pulled me into his lap right now. The weight of his arms. The warmth.

Jesus, I need to stop.

"Can I ask you something?"

His gaze lifts to me, steady and waiting.

"Why didn't you shoot me? That night you broke into the clinic?"

"I didn't want to kill you."

My stomach twists. "But you have killed before?"

His eyes narrow just a fraction. "Yes."

He confirms it the way most people would when they've seen a movie. That casual honesty should probably terrify me more than it does. He's killed people. I'm in my bedroom with a killer. This is the part where normal people call the police or at least leave the room. Maybe those therapy sessions weren't working as well as I thought.

"But you won't kill me?"

"No."

I nod and reach out to scratch Clover's ear, grounding myself in the familiar motion. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows.

"What's your favorite movie?" I ask, trying to break the heavy tension that settled between us.

"Movie?"

"Yeah. Like what you watch on TV."

"I know what a television is."

“Okay, so what’s your favorite?” I grin a little at his defensive tone.

He thinks for a second, still stroking Clover’s fur. “The Goonies.”

A laugh slips out of me before I can stop it. “Wait, seriously? The old movie from the eighties? With the pirate ship and the kids in the cave?”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “*Da*. It was the first movie I saw when I came to America. My mother wanted us to watch American classics while we were learning English. I didn’t understand anything they were saying.”

I smile while he appears slightly … amused? Or close enough to it.

“It’s a good movie,” he adds.

“Yeah, I know, I haven’t seen it in a while. So you moved to the US when you were a kid? With your family?”

“When I was ten. With my mother, my father, and my four brothers.”

I blink because that’s a lot of family to imagine. “I’m an only child,” I blurt.

“I know.”

I roll my eyes. “Where do you even find information like that about me? What kind of files do you keep on people?”

He doesn’t answer, just looks at me like I’m being dramatic about something obvious.

“Do you miss Russia?”

His throat moves slowly. He thinks about it for a moment before looking over at me, his expression softening just enough to notice. “Very much,” he says, voice dropping lower. “It’s a nice place to grow up. I miss my family there.”

It never occurred to me that Russia could be a nice place to grow up in. Everything I know about it comes from headlines. Political disasters, restrictions, the whole authoritarian mess. But that’s not what he’s talking about, is it? He’s talking about home. About family. The place itself probably doesn’t matter as much as the people in it.

“What city did you live in?”

“Yekaterinburg.”

“Oh, I’m not even going to try to pronounce that,” I say, half-laughing while rubbing the back of my neck. “I’d completely butcher it.”

His mouth twitches, and for half a second, it looks like he’s trying not to smile.

When I first saw him, he came off as cold, looked like a career criminal. Tattoos covering his skin, all bulging muscles.

But here, watching him carefully pet Clover, he seems almost gentle. Which is probably exactly what serial killers want you to think before they murder you.

Jesus, I need professional help again.

His eyes flick down to my collarbone for a second before darting away.

“Alexei …” I say, then bite my lip because I already regret starting this conversation.

“What are you really doing here?”

His head snaps toward me.

“I had a bad day.”

“Want to talk about it?”

I study him while he focuses on Clover. The tattoos on his neck are intricate, wrapping around his throat and disappearing under his shirt. His nose has been broken at least once. Maybe more.

There’s a visible bump and a mark cutting across the bridge. His hands dwarf Clover completely, covered in ink and old wounds. One particularly thick scar runs across his knuckles, raised even under the tattoo covering it.

He sighs. “*Nyet.*”

I look over at him into his brown eyes. He looks sad, though I don’t really know how to explain it. God damnit, why am I feeling bad for someone who has actually murdered people?

“What do you like doing? Like hobbies, I mean.” I ask.

I want to know more about him. He’s too big of a mystery to me.

He licks his lips. “I don’t really know. I just do whatever my family tells me to do.”

I blink. He doesn’t know?

What does he mean, whatever his family tells him to do? “Wait, you don’t have anything you do just for yourself? Nothing you enjoy?”

He’s quiet for a second. “Never really thought about it.”

That’s ... sad. Really sad. Before I can push further, he turns it back on me.

“What about you, Kelly?”

My eyes widen. I clear my throat, not prepared for the question. “Well, right now I work and take care of Clover, I guess. I don’t really want to work at that clinic though. The most exciting thing that’s happened to me there was you breaking in.” I shoot him a grin, trying to lighten the mood.

He raises an eyebrow. “I doubt that was a fun experience for you.”

He’s not wrong. “It wasn’t, at first. But ...” I trail off. “I don’t know. You’re interesting. Intimidating, but interesting.”

“Intimidating?” He sounds almost amused.

I give him a look.

He waves me off before I can say anything. “Fair.”

I grin at him. “So, seriously, nothing? No hobbies at all? What do you do when you’re not ... working?”

He considers it. “I fix things sometimes. Broken locks, pipes, whatever needs repairing. I guess. I’m good at building things.”

“You fix and build things?” I can’t hide my surprise.

“Keeps me busy. I like using my hands for something other than ...” He trails off, shakes his head. “Fixing things is simple.”

His phone starts ringing, and he pulls it out with a sigh. “I need to go.” He puts Clover down gently on the bed and gets up.

I trail after him to the front door. He puts his hand on the handle. Then stops, turning around to look into my eyes.

“Can I come over again?”

The question should set off alarms. It does set off alarms. He just showed up uninvited, acted like this was normal. My ex used to do that. Show up without asking. Act like he had a right to my space.

But this doesn’t feel the same. I don’t know why it doesn’t feel the same.

I bite my lip and nod before I can think better of it. “Sure.”

He nods. I see him glance at my mouth before looking away quickly. Then the door opens, and he disappears into the hallway. The door clicks shut behind him.

I don’t know what any of that was about, but the top three weirdest nights of my life have all involved him being part of them. I’m either losing my mind or getting myself into something I should definitely stay away from.

Probably both.

The smart thing would be to not answer the door next time. The safe thing would be to tell him not to come back. But some fucked up part of me wants to see him again. Wants him to come back.

And that part scares me more than anything else.

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Chapter 8

Alexei

It's been twelve hours since I left Kelly's apartment. Seven hundred and twenty fucking minutes since I've seen his face.

I haven't slept because Calder kept calling, needing help with grabbing a Nozares rat for interrogation. I glance at my bloody jeans, then take in what's left of the bastard tied to the chair. Can barely make out a person anymore.

"Fuck, Alexei," Calder mutters, flicking blood off his fingers. "I told you to stop an hour ago. Look at him. He won't be able to tell us anything now."

"I don't think this one had any information anyway."

I took my frustration out on him. Kelly was in my head, and my patience was already gone before this started.

Calder sighs beside me. "I had plans for him."

A wheezy yap comes from the floor. Calder's face lights up, and he bends down to pick up Tank, his ancient pug. No idea how it's still breathing. Pure spite, probably.

The thing is enormous, missing most of its teeth, and waddles instead of walks. I reach out and scratch behind his ears before he snaps at my fingers with his gums. Calder drags him everywhere. Every interrogation, every cleanup, all of it.

"Go clean this up and text me if you get anything useful."

He stares at me with those unsettling black eyes, Tank tucked under one arm. "Clean up your own goddamn mess. I didn't turn this guy into hamburger, you did. Whole night's been a bust. The last guy didn't know

shit either. Good thing Yulian dropped off some intel about their safe houses, or we'd have nothing."

My eyes narrow.

Yulian always gets the best information about the Nozares family from his girls at the escort service, though I wonder how exactly his operation keeps stumbling across cartel intel. Seems convenient that wealthy men spill family secrets to his expensive whores, but who am I to question results?

"What kind of intel?" I ask.

"Locations, mostly. A few names. Nothing we couldn't have gotten elsewhere, but it saves time." He gestures at the corpse with his free hand. "Speaking of hamburgers, I'm starving. Feel like getting some food?"

My eyes flick to the body, then back to him. Food sounds good, but what I have in mind is way more satisfying. "I have other things I have to do."

"Like what?"

"Like something that's none of your business."

His eyes narrow. "You've been doing a lot of things that require you to be away from here. Very unlike you."

I grunt and pick up the knife from the floor, cleaning it off with a torn piece of fabric. He's not wrong. I used to practically live in this basement, only going home to sleep when Calder kicked me out. Now I can't get out of here fast enough.

I glance over at him. "Since when do you keep track of my schedule?"

"You've followed the same routine since the day I met you. Sleep here, work here, eat here. Like clockwork. Now you're vanishing for days at a time. Not exactly subtle." He examines me. "What's got you so distracted?"

I shrug at him. "Nothing."

He stares at me for another beat, then lets it go. "Fine."

"Clean this up for me." I gesture at the mess on the floor. "I'll be back later when we have new orders."

He shifts Tank to his other arm and nods.

"By the way, we've got some new people joining the crew. They need to get familiar with our weapon and cargo operations. My father wants security tightened before the next shipment." I wipe blood off my hands with a rag. "I vetted them myself. They're solid."

Calder grunts. "More babysitting. Great."

“What do you mean?”

He shrugs. “Everyone’s a pain in the ass right now. You’re acting strange, Yulian’s snapping at people for no reason, Mikhail’s more out of control than usual. I’m stuck cleaning up after all of you like I’m running a daycare for psychopaths.”

What’s got me acting weird? Nothing. Everything.

Knowing Kelly’s bed is waiting for me. The fact that I’m standing here covered in someone else’s blood instead of in his apartment. I slide the clean blade back into its sheath.

“Handle it, Calder. I’m leaving.”

He smirks. “Alright. Go do whatever mysterious thing you’ve been doing.”

I head for the door without looking back. I need a shower, sleep, and Kelly. He told me I could come over again. It’s early so he’ll be leaving for work soon. Perfect timing.

By the time I get to his place, he’s already gone. Left at the same time like clockwork.

I pull my hoodie up, blood still drying under my sleeves. Brought clean clothes so I can swap out of these. I like the way he smells. Now I get to smell like him.

I take the stairs two at a time, bend at his door, and pull out my tools. Need to make a copy of his key; this is getting old.

The door clicks open. I walk in, lock it, then head straight for Clover.

She’s in her pen, blinking up at me. I pick her up, kiss the top of her head, then dig into my bag and pull out the carrot I bought at the store. Rabbits eat carrots, right? That’s what they do in cartoons. Should probably check what they actually eat so I don’t accidentally kill his rabbit.

That would be bad. He loves this thing.

I place her in her pen and head to his bathroom. Turn on the water and let it warm up.

This is crossing every normal boundary. That thought lasts two seconds before I remember I don’t give a fuck. I need his coconut-lime body wash saturating my skin. Want to smell exactly like him so when I leave, I carry a part of him with me. He’ll be on my skin all day, and he won’t even know.

I strip out of my bloody clothes and step into the shower. Water turns pink when it hits the bottom and swirls down the drain. I grab his soap and

scrub everything twice. Hair, neck, hands, arms. Making sure his scent sticks.

I could live here. In his space, breathing his air, fitting myself into the shape he leaves behind when he's gone. The idea of him walking in and finding me here does something to my chest. Would he be scared? He'd be smart to be.

Would he call the police? Doubtful. He didn't call them when I pointed a gun at him. Didn't call them after I drove him home the other night. He just keeps letting me in.

He trusts people he shouldn't. That's dangerous.

I feel myself getting hard just from picturing his face if he walked in right now. I press my forehead against the tile, cold against my skin. My hands drag down to my stomach, slow, almost annoyed at how easy this is, and wrap my fingers around my length.

I close my eyes.

Pulling the foreskin back sends this sharp little spark up my spine. Fuck.

Would that finally scare him off? Or would he stand there and stare at me like he does, all wide-eyed like he's trying to figure me out.

The thought hits lower than it should.

I let out a rough sound. Barely a sound at all. More like air breaking in my throat.

I tighten my fist around my length and stroke again. Harder. My dick twitches.

Those sea-green eyes show up behind my eyelids. The way they lift when he's confused. Those pink lips he keeps wet when he's thinking; he has no idea what that does to me.

It hits so fast, my stomach tightens without warning. I jerk myself quicker. My grip gets sloppy, water sliding everywhere, heat building right behind my balls. My breath keeps snagging in my chest. I can't stop thinking about him walking in, freezing in the doorway, seeing me like this. Seeing me lose it over him.

That pressure snaps hard. A hot pulse shoots out of me and hits the wall in messy streaks before the water drags it down. My knees nearly give out, forcing me to stay against the tile before I step out and dry off with his towel.

I wrap it around my waist. Clover's still sitting where I left her, watching me. I sigh and pick her up again, carry her to the bed, and slide

under the covers with her pulled against my chest, and give her a scratch behind the ear.

Turn my head and bury my face in his pillow to breathe in his scent. Would he notice if I took his pillowcase? The one that smells most like him, that his head rests on every night?

He might. But by then I'd already have what I need.

I shouldn't have shown up at his apartment last night, but I needed to see him. Needed to be close. Got fucking pissed when we were interrupted and I had to leave.

Part of me wants to stay until he gets home, watch his face when he walks in and finds me in his bed. See the shock in his eyes when he realizes I've been here all along, that I'm always here whether he knows it or not. But I won't. Not yet.

I set my alarm to leave before he comes home. Buy some food for us on the way back, surprise him with it after work.

I HAD THE BEST FUCKING SLEEP OF MY LIFE IN HIS BED EARLIER. WRAPPED in his sheets, breathing him in. Almost didn't leave. Only did because showing him the real me too soon would scare him off.

Have to pace this.

Eventually he'll figure it out. That I've already decided he's mine. That there's no version of this where he walks away. But by then, it won't matter because he won't want to leave.

I knock, holding a bag from that diner. The one I tailed him to last week where he sat alone in the corner booth eating pancakes.

I hate pancakes. Always have. But he seemed to enjoy them. So here we are.

The door opens.

Kelly blinks at me. Wet hair pushed back, skin flushed from a shower. Forest green shirt, gray sweats. Collarbone still damp.

We smell the same.

Satisfaction hits my chest knowing I was in his shower earlier, using that exact soap, that exact towel. The one he just used. The one that touched his skin is the same one that touched mine. I left it slightly damp on

purpose. If he noticed, he'd assume he just didn't dry it properly last time he used it.

He has no idea.

I lift the bag a little. "I brought food."

He looks at it, then at me. Opens his mouth like he's about to say something, doesn't. Just pushes the door open wider and steps back to let me in.

I brush his shoulder as I pass him.

"It's pancakes."

His eyebrows twitch like he's trying not to laugh, then shuts the door.

"I love pancakes," he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

I know.

I know which diner you prefer, which booth you always sit in. But I'm trying to pretend to be civilized, so I don't say any of that.

"Want to eat on your bed?" I ask, lifting the bag.

"Go ahead, I'll get us some plates and forks."

I nod and head toward the bedroom, sit on the edge of his bed. Clover's still passed out in the same spot I left her when I snuck out an hour ago. Her little legs twitch like she's dreaming.

His bare pillow stares back at me. The case is still safely hidden inside my hoodie, pressed against my skin. Warm from my body heat now. Mine.

Tonight, I'll find out if stealing more pieces of him helps me sleep or just makes the craving worse.

Probably worse.

Kelly walks in with two plates, a stack of napkins, silverware balanced on top. He's smiling, dimples showing. He sets everything down and sits beside me. His knee bumps mine, and he doesn't move it. I lean toward him before I realize I'm doing it. Like a plant toward sunlight. Fuck.

"Why don't you have any furniture?" I ask, eyeing the room. Just a bed and a desk shoved against the far wall. Nothing else.

He rubs the back of his neck, suddenly awkward. "Oh, uh. Please don't think I'm weird. I swear I'm not. I just haven't really made this place mine yet."

Would it be weird if I bought him furniture? Is that another boundary I'm not supposed to cross? I could fill this entire apartment with everything he needs. Everything he wants. Make it perfect for him.

Restraint is harder than making people disappear. Who fucking knew.

But I’m trying. For him.

I could just take him instead. Lock him in my place where he’d be safe, protected, mine. Keep him there until he understands there’s nowhere on this Earth he can hide from me.

The thought fills me with quiet satisfaction. But that would scare him. He’s not ready yet.

So I’ll keep pretending. Keep letting him think he has a choice in this. For now.

I’ve never done this before. Never wanted to. The times I fucked women, I had to make myself do it. Had to close my eyes and pretend. Women who didn’t ask why I was so detached, why I never looked at them. Get it done, get out. No names, no pancakes, definitely no furniture shopping.

Just evidence I wasn’t what my family would kill me for being. I learned that lesson young given what happened to my mother’s twin brother for loving another man.

We open the bags. I slide some pancakes onto his plate, then mine, and hand him the syrup. He cuts into them and lifts the fork, bites down, closes his eyes for a second and lets out a low, satisfying moan.

I wonder if he’d moan the same way if I put my tongue on him. If I’d get to taste every fucking sound.

I shove the thought down.

“I think we own the same soap,” he says, chewing, smiling at his plate. “You smell like coconuts and lime.”

I look at him. “*Da*. Very strange coincidence.”

He hums, amused, and takes another bite. I stab into mine and chew. I get it now. I get why he’s obsessed with this place. These pancakes are ridiculous.

“I’m not very good at this,” I admit.

He shoots me a curious look. “At what?”

“Talking.” I pause, struggling to find the words. This is harder than I thought it would be.

“Why not?”

Because the more someone knows about you, the more power they have.

“I don’t know.” I look at him. “But I’m trying. With you.”

His expression softens. “That means a lot. Really.”

I nod, not sure what else to say. This is new territory. Uncomfortable. But I don't want to stop.

"Did you have the stitches removed yet?" He asks.

I shrug. "I took them out myself."

He looks at me like I'm insane, shakes his head, and takes another bite of his pancake.

"Kelly."

He glances over, mouth still half full.

"Do I scare you?"

He chokes. Actual cough, mid-chew, like I just hit him in the throat. He scrambles for his drink and takes a few gulps, rubbing the corner of his eye where it's watering.

"Jesus," he mutters, still coughing. "What a conversation starter."

I need to know. I need to understand how much truth he can handle before he sees the real me, and it scares him enough to run. Not that he could get far. I would always find him.

He clears his throat again and sets the cup down. "When you pointed a gun at me, yeah. I was scared. At the club too. It was a little weird how you just knew where I lived."

"But not now?"

He meets my eyes, then shakes his head. "No."

I'd never hurt him. Never.

But if anyone else tries to? I'll bury them alive. Slowly. Make sure they feel every second of it. I've never had boundaries when it comes to things I want, and with him, I don't even pretend they exist. He just doesn't realize he's already mine. Hasn't figured it out yet. He will.

He puts his hand over mine, then looks at me. He rubs his thumb over my tattooed skin, then looks into my eyes.

"You're different than one would think when they first see you."

"You mean when I pointed the gun at you and told you I would kill you?"

He rolls his eyes. "Can we just ignore that part?"

He wants to ignore that part? I can't figure this man out.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I sigh. I choose to ignore it this time, just for a few more minutes. I want a few more minutes. That's it. Just a few. I waited all fucking day for this.

His soft hands keep rubbing back and forth over my skin, sending prickles up my arms and leaving goose bumps.

“You going to answer that?”

“*Nyet*.”

“Will you say something in Russian to me?”

“*Ya pokazyvayu tebe chasti sebya, kotorye nikto ne vidit.*” I’m showing you parts of myself no one else ever sees.

“What does it mean?”

I shrug.

“You can’t just say something that sounds that beautiful and not tell me.” He’s smiling now. “Please?”

He keeps grinning at me, and I’m transfixed by the way his tongue drags across his bottom lip. I can’t look away, can’t breathe properly. His fingers tighten around my hand, and I turn my palm over immediately, threading our fingers together.

His breath stutters, and the sound makes something in me settle and ignite at the same time. My hand swallows his. Makes him look smaller, more breakable than he is. I want to memorize this. The warmth of his palm against mine, the way his fingers fit between mine.

He’s seeing parts of me I didn’t know still existed. Never knew touch could feel like this, deliberate and tender.

My phone buzzes again, and he pulls his hand back. The loss of contact feels wrong. I close my eyes, jaw clenched, then drag the phone out.

Group Chat: screwups

MIKHAIL:

added Calder

CALDER:

???

MIKHAIL:

ALEXEIIII

MIKHAIL:

Where are you

DANIIL:

Maybe he’s busy

MIKHAIL:

Doing what? he has no life

CALDER:

True. Fun requires a personality

MIKHAIL:

Exactly

ME:

What do you want asshole? I'm busy

MIKHAIL:

Father has another job for you and Calder. Wants it done tonight…

ME:

Since when do you run errands for him?

ME:

And did you tell him about the retired detective yet like you said you would?

MIKHAIL:

I'm literally standing right next to him you dick

MIKHAIL:

And fuck no I didn't tell him

MIKHAIL:

He's in one of those moods where breathing wrong gets you a broken nose

MIKHAIL:

I'll tell him later I swear

He sends a blurry selfie of him and Father who looks five seconds from murder.

He saves his cruelest lessons for Mikhail. Always has. The rest of us learned to duck and weave around his moods, but with Mikhail, Father dissects his every move, pushes him past his breaking point, then pushes harder. Like he's trying to carve something specific out of him, even if it kills what's left.

ME:

Text me the details

ME:

And grow some balls

MIKHAIL:

WAIT

MIKHAIL:

What are you busy with Alexei?

CALDER:

I just got home from cleaning Alexei's mess and I had plans too you dick

MIKHAIL:

YOU BOTH HAVE PLANS?

MIKHAIL:

Since when do you two have social lives

MIKHAIL:

Is it a girl Alexei? Someone actually likes you?

DANIIL:

Focus please

MIKHAIL:

Sending details but were talking about this later

I turn off my phone and clutch it.

"I need to go."

Kelly nods. "Okay. I'll walk you to the door."

I move and give Clover a quick pet on the head. She twitches but doesn't wake up. Smart rabbit. She's keeping my secrets. Good girl.

I stop at the door. Same fucking thing as yesterday. Interrupted again. I should've turned my phone off the second I got here. Next time I'm staying until I'm ready to leave.

"Will you tell me now what it meant?" he asks.

I glance back. "Just that the pancakes were good."

He scrunches his nose. "That's it? Seriously?"

If he knew what I really said, he'd never let me back in here.

"I was expecting something else," he says, suspicious now.

He wraps his arms around me without warning. His face presses against my chest, and I feel his breath through my shirt. My hands stay frozen at my sides like my brain just stopped working.

“Sorry, I’m a hugger,” he mumbles against my chest. “Thanks for the pancakes.”

I want to wrap my arms around him and never let go. I want to carry him back to that bed and keep him there until the rest of the world disappears.

He lets go and steps back like nothing happened. Looks at me with a small smile, easy and soft, like he didn’t just completely destroy every defense I have.

My mother hugged me when I was small. Before I became this. Before I learned that affection is weakness and it gets you killed. I forgot what that felt like until Kelly. Now I remember everything I lost. All those years of no one, and now him. It’s too much and not enough at the same time.

“Have a good night, Alexei.”

I stare at him for a beat longer. “You too.”

I walk out before I do something that crosses every line we haven’t crossed yet.

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Chapter 9

Kelly

I tossed and turned all night, maybe got forty minutes of actual sleep before my alarm went off. At that point, I would've welcomed someone breaking in and shoving a pillow over my face. At least then I'd have gotten some rest.

I can't stop replaying Alexei's visit last night. There's just something about him that I can't shake. I want to hug him again. Wish he'd hugged me back. Felt needy as hell when he didn't.

I don't think he's ever let himself get close to anyone. I doubt he even has friends outside his family. The way he petted and held Clover so carefully, as if he was afraid of breaking her, plays in my head. Nonstop.

I wonder what this is between us. There's no explanation for why we keep gravitating toward each other. It terrifies me. I can't shake the feeling that we're two people who'd given up on connection and stumbled into each other in the worst possible way.

I exhale and rub my temples. Loneliness does things to a person. Makes you desperate. I've been isolated for so long that maybe I'm just grasping at any sign of human connection, building castles out of nothing.

The rational part of my brain knows I should stay far away from him.

But the part that's been aching for months keeps circling back to last night. Every look, every pause, every moment he actually shared something real about himself. I want it to mean something so badly it hurts. He probably doesn't think about me at all, and here I am spiraling over every word he said.

I wish he didn't have to leave so abruptly. His phone's always going off, pulling him away mid-conversation. Whatever he does clearly doesn't allow

for downtime. I try not to think too hard about what kind of work demands that level of constant availability. He's admitted to killing people. I can connect the dots even if I don't want to.

"Kelly!"

The grating, nasal shriek of Gary's voice cuts across the clinic like nails on glass and makes my left eye twitch. I brace myself for whatever fresh hell he's about to dump on me.

"Yes?" I say, trying not to sound like I want to rip my own face off.

I will not lose my cool today; I absolutely will not.

He stomps over with that awkward, stretched-out height and gray caterpillar eyebrows that have never met a pair of tweezers. He could spend five minutes in front of a mirror and still look like an angry baked potato, but that's not even the problem since his personality is what makes him truly ugly.

"Have you taken care of the inventory?" he barks. "And the new tool shipment? And Mrs. Chen's Chihuahua appointment at two?"

I clench my jaw. I am a licensed veterinarian. Not a delivery boy, not a receptionist, not his personal intern who jumps at every demand.

"Yes, Gary," I mutter, trying not to grind my teeth. "Inventory's done, tools are unpacked, and Mrs. Chen's appointment is in twenty minutes."

He snorts. "People these days have no respect for time, no concept of accountability. I don't know what's happened to the world."

Here we go with another rant.

"She's not even late yet."

He glares at me. "She will be. They always are. This is why society is crumbling, because people think rules don't apply to them. We should put a sign out front that says five minutes late, appointment canceled, still get charged."

I pinch the bridge of my nose while he keeps ranting about something that has absolutely nothing to do with dogs or tools or reality in general.

Camilla appears behind him. She makes a small circling motion next to her ear and points straight at Gary's back. I clamp my mouth shut to keep from laughing. She mouths *good luck* and disappears before he can turn around. Gary's still ranting when I slip away. I need to check on the animals in recovery and grab coffee before Mrs. Chen gets here.

Twenty minutes later, I'm washing my hands at the sink in the break room when Camilla pokes her head in. "Mrs. Chen and Dolly are ready in

room five.”

“Thanks,” I say, drying my hands.

I step into the exam room and find an elderly woman in her eighties with soft gray curls tucked under a wool hat and pearl earrings that catch the overhead light. She’s got a little Chihuahua sitting on the metal table, watching me with suspicious dark eyes.

“Is this Dolly?” I let the dog sniff my outstretched hand cautiously.

“Yes, dear, sorry we’re a bit behind. There was construction on every corner, and the taxi driver was grumbling the whole time. I don’t even know what they’re trying to fix anymore because the roads are all cracked anyway.”

I smile. “No worries. I’m Kelly.”

“Oh, I know, sweetie. Camilla told me about you.”

I give Dolly another gentle scratch behind the ear before starting the exam. I don’t like Chihuahuas much. They’re tiny, but they bite like little demons. One nearly took my finger off last year. Dolly seems calm enough, just watching me with those dark eyes.

“The chart said she’s ten with a heart murmur, been managing it with medication. Any changes in her activities lately?”

The woman hums. “She’s a little slower getting around, but she still bosses me around just fine.”

I check Dolly’s ears and eyes. Listen to her heartbeat with my stethoscope, then feel under her belly for any masses or tender spots. Her legs move fine when I check her joints. Her breathing sounds stable. For a ten-year-old Chihuahua with heart problems, she’s doing pretty damn well.

The visit goes quickly. I wave them off, then head back to the cramped office to stare at the mountain of paperwork waiting on my desk. I groan into the scattered papers.

Can this day please be over already?

I PUT ON MY HELMET AND PUSH MY BIKE DOWN THE ALLEY BESIDE THE clinic. The rain’s light, more mist than downpour. The wind cuts straight through my jacket and hits my face like tiny needles.

I sigh and swing my leg over the seat and take off. Every muscle in my body aches. I just want to get home, curl up in bed, and forget this day ever existed.

I take the usual route, cutting through side streets to avoid the worst traffic. My brain won't shut up. It keeps circling back to him, his face. I must've sat in the break room for twenty minutes staring into my coffee, completely checked out.

I spot my building in the distance and let out a breath of relief. It's getting dark fast. I shift lanes slightly, staying off the sidewalk so I don't accidentally plow through some poor dog walker. My legs and back hurt, and I just want to be home and safe.

A sound hits behind me, engine noise getting closer.

Then something slams into my back tire. The handlebars rip out of my hands. I hit face-first into the asphalt. My helmet slams sideways. My cheek scrapes across the rough street. Pain shoots through every part of my body. My breath locks up like my lungs forgot how to work.

I just groan and roll onto my back, trying to breathe. It feels like there's a knife lodged in my chest. I don't even know if I'm moving or if the street is spinning around me.

"What do you think, Mendez? You think we hit him hard enough?"

I know that voice. I'd recognize it even if I were dying. Don't even have to guess who's standing over me.

Two men in uniform stand above me with matching smirks.

Mendez shrugs like he's considering the question seriously. "Nah, could've gone a little faster. Might've gotten more airtime that way."

I want to cry. My whole body feels like it's been torn apart and stapled together wrong. My wrists ache, my ribs feel crushed. I don't know if it's blood or rain or both. I won't cry, not in front of him.

David. My ex.

Six months since I tried to file the restraining order after he snapped my arm like a goddamn twig. That was just the last time. There were so many other times before that, so many bruises I covered with long sleeves, so many excuses I made for why I couldn't go out or why I was walking funny or why I jumped when people moved too fast around me.

I sat in the ER and lied through my teeth while the nurses asked me over and over again if it was just a fall or something else. Because what was I supposed to say?

That I'd been letting someone hurt me for two years? That I'd convinced myself it was love when he said he was sorry afterward? That I believed him when he said it was my fault for making him angry?

I thought filing the restraining order would make it stop. Instead, I learned exactly how powerless I really was.

The paperwork got lost, then misfiled, then lost again. Suddenly, nobody could find my statements. The photos of my injuries mysteriously disappeared from the system.

It's been months of him making sure I knew he was untouchable. Following me just because he could. Showing up at places he knew I'd be because who was I going to call?

The police? His friends? His colleagues who'd already made it clear they thought I was just some hysterical ex trying to ruin a good man's career?

The system isn't broken. It's working exactly the way it's supposed to; just not for people like me.

He spits next to my face. "Been a long time, Kelly. You been good?"

My throat burns, and my whole chest feels caved in. Every breath hurts, and every second stretches like torture.

A woman's voice cuts through the haze, her boots clicking on the sidewalk. "Jesus, is he okay? What happened?"

David straightens up and switches on that professional tone. "We're handling it, ma'am. Saw him fall off his bike, pulled over to check on him."

She hesitates. Doubt flickers in her eyes, but then she nods and hurries away.

I glance at their squad car with the lights off. My bike lies crumpled on the ground next to it.

David crouches next to me, smirking. "You've got a bit of blood here." He gestures near my chin with mock concern. "What do you think, Mendez? Should we help him up?"

"Or charge him," Mendez chimes in. "No working lights on his bike, and it's dark. We could've hit him worse. Not really our fault he's riding unsafe."

"Please stop, David." My voice barely makes it past my lips.

He leans in closer with fake confusion plastered across his face. "Stop what? We're just doing our jobs here. I mean, you could've seriously hurt someone riding in the dark with no light. Kinda reckless, don't you think?"

He pauses, then snaps his fingers like he just remembered something important. “Speaking of reckless, those parking tickets you’ve been ignoring. That’s not very responsible, Kelly.”

Mendez snorts. “Bet he’s still sleeping in that shoebox apartment, can’t afford a damn bulb for his bike.”

All of a sudden, their hands are on me, one gripping each elbow as they haul me upright. They drag me up to the sidewalk, and pain shoots through my arms straight to my ribs. I almost black out right there. The street tilts sideways. They tighten their grip like they’re trying to prove a point.

David’s fingers dig into my elbow, pressing exactly where the break was.

Mendez walks over to my bike, lifts it with one hand, then hurls it down at my feet.

The front wheel twists wrong, and the light is crushed beyond repair, just like everything else they touch.

Mendez climbs into the cruiser. Leaving me alone with the devil in uniform.

David grabs my arm too hard. Pain shoots down my entire arm, making me gasp and nearly double over.

“You know, Kelly,” he says, voice dropping low and intimate. “You really need to get your shit together. This is getting pathetic. Who knows what I might have to do next time? Maybe get a doctor to take a look at you because you’ve clearly been neglecting your health.”

He taps two fingers against his temple mockingly. “Mental health’s important, you know, and you haven’t been right since your mommy died. Maybe we should give you a ride to the loonie bin, let the real professionals take a look at what’s wrong with you.”

My stomach turns violently. I just stare at him and those cold blue eyes that used to look at me with something I thought was love.

He lets go of my arm, and I immediately yank it back, cradling it against my chest protectively.

“Y-you need to leave me alone,” I stutter, my voice completely wrecked. “I’ll r-report you again.”

He laughs like I just told the funniest joke he’s ever heard. “Yeah? That worked out real well the first time, didn’t it? You lying about me breaking your arm? Everyone knows you probably did it yourself because you needed the attention. Poor little Kelly, all alone after Mommy croaked.”

My bottom lip trembles. I bite down on it hard, shaking my head. I try to step past him. I don’t want to be near him; I can’t handle this right now. I just want to go home. Just want this nightmare to stop. My bike isn’t even worth picking up; it’s destroyed and beyond any hope of repair. Just like me.

He doesn’t follow me. Instead, he laughs while I limp away from him.

I used to think I was stronger than this. That I could survive anything. Now I know survival isn’t the same as living. I’m still breathing, still moving forward. But all the pieces that used to fit together are scattered behind me, and I don’t know how to put them together anymore.

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Chapter 10

Alexei

I haven't seen Kelly in two days. Haven't seen him leave his apartment at all, for that matter.

Something's off and it's eating at me. He could be sick. People get sick in the fall, especially someone who works around animals and germs all day. That's the logical explanation. The normal explanation.

But I was forced to leave to handle another interrogation for my father. What if I missed something while I was gone? What if someone got to him?

What is it about him that's made me like this? I've never wanted anyone this way. Maybe it's because he's the first person who's touched me like I matter. Like contact with me is something good instead of something to endure. Now I'm addicted to it. To *him*.

I can't stop thinking about his hands, his warmth, the way he doesn't pull away when I get close. I want more. Need more. Like I'm trying to fill some endless void that's been empty my whole life.

I stare at his building, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel in the same pattern I've been repeating since I parked here.

I even sent him a text yesterday. Just asked if everything was fine. Casual. Normal.

He left me on read. On fucking read.

Maybe he doesn't want to see me again. I wouldn't blame him for that. Any sane person would run from me. But he did say I could come over again.

The thought of him hiding from me makes something ugly and possessive twist in my chest. Makes me want to go upstairs and prove to

him that locked doors don’t mean anything to me. That if I want to see him, I will. Nothing stops me.

The only thing holding me back is knowing he’d look at me the way everyone else does when they finally see what I really am.

Still doesn’t stop me from sitting here watching his windows for any flicker of movement that might tell me he’s alive. Something’s wrong. I can feel it crawling under my skin, that animal instinct that tells me when things aren’t right.

I’m not going to go upstairs and check on him. That would scare him. *Blyat*. This restraint thing really is harder than killing people.

Fuck it.

I pull my hood up against the wind that bites at my jaw. Cross the street fast with my head down, punch in the code I memorized already. Up the stairs two at a time until I reach his floor.

I knock.

I’m trying to be polite by knocking, even though I could already be inside if I wanted to.

He’s not answering.

I knock again, harder this time. Still nothing.

I glance down the empty hall and listen for footsteps, voices, anything. There’s nothing except silence and the hum of that busted exit sign above the stairwell.

I stare at his door and try to picture him. Just asleep. Sick. Ignoring me on purpose because he’s finally figured out that I’m fucked up.

No. That’s not right. I know his schedule better than he does.

I pull out his apartment key.

He’ll forgive me if he’s alive and unhurt. He has to.

I push the door open to complete darkness and silence. No lights anywhere, no sound of movement or breathing. I move further in and let the door close behind me with a click that echoes too loud in the stillness.

Maybe I screwed up and missed him leaving. I walk through anyway toward the bedroom without turning on any lights or calling his name. If he’s here, he’ll hear me coming, and if he’s not, then I’ll know soon enough.

The bedroom’s darker. I pause at the threshold to scan across the space until I see a lump under the covers. I walk to the bed and stop. He’s not

moving, not even the slight rise and fall of breathing that I can detect. I watch him for a long moment, then sit slowly on the edge of the mattress.

The second my weight shifts, he jerks violently, and the scream that tears out of him is so high-pitched it makes me blink and my ears ring. He groans like it physically hurts to move and scrambles back against the wall. Pressing himself as far away from me as possible.

I can barely make him out in the darkness, but I can feel him staring at me with what's probably terror.

Right. I still have my hood up.

That's probably why he screamed like that. The hood makes me look like the grim fucking reaper sitting on his bed in this darkness. Which is almost funny because I've been called worse things.

I pull it down and tilt my head at him. "You weren't answering your door."

"A-Alexei? What the fuck?" he chokes out. "How did you get in here?"

"I have a copy of your key," I say, because there's no point in lying about it.

"What?"

"I made a copy. Can't really have one of your neighbors see me crouched in front of your door picking the lock. Might have to kill them." I pause and think it over. "I could just stage an accident and push them down the stairs. Depends on how loud they scream. Your building has thin walls, very thin. Your next-door neighbor, Mrs. Smith, would probably call the cops. She seems like the type. Whole thing becomes messy, and I don't like mess."

"Oh my god," he breathes, voice strained and horrified. "Stop. Please stop talking like that. You can't just say things like that."

He doesn't want to hear about the neighbor situation. Fair enough.

I'm supposed to keep the killing theoretical and private. Not explain exactly how I'd push someone down the stairs and make it look accidental. That makes him nervous.

I'll have to try keeping it vague from now on.

It's too dark to see his face properly, but I don't need to see it to know he's panicking. I can hear it in his breathing, the way his voice shook when he said my name earlier.

I walk over to the light switch. "Wait, don't."

My finger hovers over the switch. I flip it on anyway and look at him. He's pulled the covers over himself again.

"Just please don't freak out, okay? It looks worse than it is. I'm fine, I promise, and please stop talking about killing my neighbor."

He drags the blanket down slowly. Half his face is purple and swollen, scraped raw in places like he was dragged across concrete. His hands fist the sheets like he's trying to hide them. I see the bruises there too, running up his chest and scattered across his arms.

"What the fuck happened?"

I'm going to kill whoever touched him, rip them apart so slowly they'll beg me for death, and I won't show mercy.

"Nothing, I just fell off my bike on the way home from work. It's fine, I'm fine." He rubs the back of his head and tries to give me a small smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

I don't buy it.

I move to the bed and sit in front of him, my hands going up before I can stop them. I want to touch, to check, to prove he's lying. He flinches and moves further away from me.

"There is no way a fall from a bike did that. What happened?" I bite out.

"No, really. I fell off my bike. There was this lady who cut in front of me, and I shot forward and hit the asphalt."

"What lady? What was her name?"

"What?"

I'm going to find her and break her in fucking half, put her under the pavement she shoved him into. I don't say that out loud though. *Learning*.

"That doesn't matter. It was just an accident."

"It was really an accident?" I pull out my phone and shoot a quick message to Daniil.

I'll get this woman's name, and then I'll pay her a visit.

"Yes."

"Can we just go back a little? What do you mean you made a copy of the key to my apartment?" he asks, staring at me like I've lost my mind completely.

"For emergencies," I say with a shrug, because it's obvious.

He opens his mouth, shuts it again, pinches the bridge of his nose. "In Russia, do they not teach you basic social norms? Like personal space? Or

that making a copy of someone's key when you barely know them is completely insane?"

"It was good that I did it. This was an emergency, and now I can take care of you."

He groans under his breath and rubs at his eyebrows again, muttering something I don't catch. I don't care what he calls it. He can call it weird, insane, whatever word makes him feel safe. I know I'm right. If I hadn't done it, I wouldn't be here, and he'd be alone. Hurt, with no one to help him. That thought makes my chest tight, and my jaw clench. He doesn't understand yet, but he will.

"Have you eaten?" I ask.

"No … I cut up some vegetables for Clover earlier and ate a little of that."

"Then it's good I made a copy of that key."

"Jesus Christ." He drags a hand down his face. "I'm just going to ignore this for now, okay? Because I am really desperate and I do need help, and some company would be nice."

"I'm going to order us food," I say, my phone already in my hand while I'm pulling up nearby restaurants to check what delivers to this area.

WE SIT ON THE BED WITH CARTONS OF CHINESE TAKEOUT BETWEEN US. I went and got his laptop, set it up, and let him pick what to watch. He asked for *How I Met Your Mother*. From what I've seen on his computer, it's always that show.

"The entire show is just him oversharing to his kids about his love life?" I ask, popping a piece of chicken in my mouth.

Kelly scrunches his nose and looks over at me. "When you put it like that, yeah. But it's a funny show."

I hum and shove more food into my mouth.

I want to ask him to come closer, but the words won't come out. I've spent my whole life pushing people away. Now I don't know how to pull them in. The screen doesn't hold my attention. I'm watching him, and he looks completely wrecked. We finish eating and another episode rolls.

I don't buy the bike story.

Those green eyes are too dull, too sad. He usually has this light in them, even when he's exhausted. Right now, all I see is pain buried underneath, sadness bleeding through no matter how hard he tries to hide it from me. He's lying. I know what his lies look like.

Something happened, and he doesn't want to tell me. I want to ask, but I can see how fragile he is right now. Pushing him will only make him retreat further. He'll tell me when he's ready, when he feels safe enough. I just have to be patient and show him that whatever it is, I'm not going anywhere.

"Is it okay if I take a quick shower?" he asks.

I nod. Get off the bed, move to his side, and hold out my hand. He stares at it for a second like he's not sure he should trust it. Then lets me pull him up. The sound he makes when his feet hit the floor, that wheeze of pain, makes something violent twist in my chest.

I walk him to the bathroom, flick the light on, push the door open, and go straight to the shower to pull the curtain back and turn on the water. When I turn, he's staring at the floor with his chin wobbling like he's about to break completely.

My hands ache with the need to touch him. To pull him close and tell him it's going to be okay. To be the kind of person who knows how to comfort someone without breaking them further. But I'm not. So, I just stand here, watching him almost fall apart, wishing I knew how to catch him.

"Thanks," he says, voice so low I barely catch it.

"Do you need help getting in?"

"No. It's fine. Thanks."

I walk out to give him privacy.

I pause at his kitchen counter, eyeing that chipped blue mug sitting unwashed by his sink, the one he uses every morning. Would he notice if it disappeared? Of course. It's obviously his go-to. But accidents happen. Mugs shatter, get lost.

Still dirty from this morning's coffee. Mine.

Clover's sitting on the floor watching me when I come into his room. I scoop her up and carry her to the bed, and I lie with her on my chest while I wait and listen to the water running.

He comes out wrapped in a towel, moving slow and careful. The need hits me hard and spreads through my chest like poison. This is wrong on

every level. I want him too much.

It's against everything I was raised to be. It's everything my family would never accept. When I look into his green eyes, none of it matters though. All I want is to drag him down to me and keep him there, tell him it's going to be alright even if it's a lie.

"Can I lie with you?" he asks, biting his lip.

"*Da*."

He hesitates, then lowers himself onto the bed, groaning as he stretches his legs out.

I sit up and lift Clover, setting her in her usual spot on the side of the bed. Then cross the room to switch off the light before coming back to pull the covers over him. He's still only wearing the towel, but it doesn't matter.

I lie on my side beside him. My hand brushes against his warmth under the covers, heat radiating off his skin in the dark. My chest tightens. It's nothing, just skin contact, but it feels like fire.

I want to hold him still, keep him against me, keep him safe from whatever did this to him. I've gone my whole life without needing to be touched. Now I can't think about anything else. What did he do to me?

My hand trails up his waist and around his stomach. I pull him against me carefully. His head turns toward me, uncertain, but he doesn't pull away. He shifts closer and lets his head rest in the crook of my arm.

I wrap my arm around his back and drag him closer. One of his legs crosses over mine as I slide my other hand down to his lower back. He's soft against me, too soft, and every part of me wants to take more. I hold him close instead, burying the want under control.

His weight sinks into me. It feels wrong how right this is.

I should let go, but I don't. I can't.

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Chapter 11

Kelly

A featherlight touch moving up and down my arm jolts me awake.

I was so out of it last night after barely sleeping for days. After what happened with … no, I'm not doing this today. My body still aches, but that's probably my fault anyway for not getting out of the way fast enough.

It all crashes back to me now.

The break-in. Alexei standing there in my apartment like it was completely normal.

Okay, not breaking in, according to him, because apparently, if you make a copy of someone's key without asking, it doesn't count as breaking and entering.

Something's seriously wrong with me because I keep letting this man rewrite reality, and I don't even try to stop him. Maybe I just attract people who think they can do whatever they want with me.

At least he's not like David; Alexei's different.

I should care more that he's probably been watching me since that night at the clinic.

Weirdly, I don't because deep down I know he won't hurt me.

His fingers keep dragging up and down my arm in slow, steady strokes. The effect it has on me though? That's a different story entirely. When his eyes meet mine, I feel pinned in place under his stare. He is so attractive it's ridiculous.

He ditched his leather jacket and black hoodie last night, and now he is only in some sort of white thermal shirt that clings to every line of his abs. The fact that he stayed the night and let me sleep curled up against him is weirdly sweet in a way I can't explain.

He frowns like he’s thinking really hard about something.

“Why is your name Kelly?”

I can’t. I actually can’t with this guy.

That’s what he chooses to say first thing in the morning?

I roll my eyes. “Ultrasound screwed up the gender. My parents didn’t bother with a blood test, and they’d already promised my Irish grandmother they’d name the baby after her. So … Kelly. Then I showed up a boy, and they’d already bought all these pink clothes, so yeah, I’m wearing pink in every baby picture until I was a year old.”

He shrugs. “My cousin’s name is Makarov. After the gun.”

I snort. “You’re kidding.”

He doesn’t blink or show any sign he’s joking. *Oh my god, he’s not kidding.*

I start laughing, then immediately choke on it and wheeze from the pain. “Being named Kelly Francis was literal hell in high school. There was this one guy. He’d shove my head down toilets, hold me under until I couldn’t breathe. Called me faggot every chance he got. Once, he beat me so bad I couldn’t see out of my left eye for a week. Told everyone I got jumped while walking home. They all believed him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Brent Cole Lawson. He used to hit on my friend Camilla too, made her super uncomfortable.”

He hums thoughtfully.

“Wait, why do you keep asking me for names of people?”

“No reason.”

I narrow my eyes at him. I thought this was a Russian quirk the first time. Cultural thing, needing names specifically. But this is the second time he’s asked, and it’s clicking into place now. Jesus Christ. I’ve been helping him make a list, haven’t I? No more names from me. Ever. I don’t really have words for him. He’s not what you expect when you first meet him.

His hand comes to a stop at the top of my shoulder. I catch him glancing down at my mouth again, then he licks his own lips. I swallow hard.

He really needs to stop doing that. He doesn’t actually want to kiss me, not really. Right?

I think even staying in bed with me like this is probably a huge deal for him. It doesn’t stop my body’s reaction though.

The towel’s gone, and I’m wrapped around him like a koala. Naked.

He glances down. Heat rushes up my neck, flooding straight into my face.

“Sorry,” I blurt, voice coming out way too high. “I’ll get dressed.”

His hand trails higher, from my shoulder up to my chin, tilting my face toward his.

Goosebumps break out across my skin. I can’t breathe properly. He licks his lips again and leans in closer, stopping right in front of my face with his breath warm against my mouth. His dark eyes search mine, and I nod.

Maybe too fast, but fuck it, I’ve been waiting for this.

His lips press against mine. The kiss is soft for maybe two seconds before it turns desperate. He cups my face, thumb dragging along my jaw as he pulls me in, while collaring my nape.

His lips part and his tongue pushes into my mouth, hungry and demanding. I open for him without thinking, let him in, and the feeling of it makes my brain shut off completely. His tongue slides against mine, slick and hot, coaxing sounds out of me I didn’t plan on making. He groans into my mouth, and I feel it everywhere. His hand tightens on my nape, fingers digging in. The kiss gets messier, wetter. We’re both past the point of restraint.

My dick throbs, going from half-hard to fully hard in seconds. I shift and feel him pressed against me, thick and hard through his jeans.

Heat floods my face, my throat, everywhere.

I push myself up, ribs screaming in protest, and swing my leg over to straddle him. His hands drop to my waist immediately, one hand squeezing hard, the other sliding down to grab my ass and pull me against him.

Our cocks grind together through his denim, and I gasp into his mouth. The friction is rough, not enough. He does it again, and I can’t breathe, can’t think past the feeling of him hard underneath me. I pull back just enough to see him. His lips are swollen and wet, his eyes locked on mine, pupils blown so wide they’re almost black.

“Is this okay?”

“*Da*.”

He grips my hair and yanks me down, then kisses me harder—mouth open, tongue pushing deep inside my mouth, flicking against mine. My body presses against him, and his hand spreads wide across my lower back.

I drag my tongue down his jaw to his throat and start kissing, sucking hard enough to bruise. I want to mark him everywhere, claim him the way he's claimed me. My tongue flicks against his neck, and I bite down, then pull back and look. There's already red blooming between the edges of his tattoos. I lick over it and suck onto his skin, and he twitches under me.

"You are injured. Let me take care of you."

My breath catches. I manage a nod.

His fingers press into my shoulders and push me down against the bed, then he climbs over me. He doesn't put weight where I'm hurt. He leans down and starts kissing along my neck, slow and careful at first, but deeper the lower he goes.

His mouth finds my chest, tongue circling one nipple before moving to the other.

He bites soft, but enough to make me jolt, and then he trails down, lips trailing over my stomach.

He slides his hands under my ass, gripping and shifting me until I'm flat on my back, spread out. My cock's leaking already. My breathing stutters, too fast. He looks up once, eyes dark, then his tongue drags across his lips like he's still deciding how to start.

His hand wraps around the base of me, and then his mouth is there. Just the tip—warm, wet, uncertain. I gasp, hips twitching.

"Alexei, more, please," I choke out, already a mess.

He doesn't move right away. Just licks at the head, slow and clumsy, trying different angles. His tongue circles me once, then again, a little harder this time. He pulls back, glances at me, then goes in deeper, takes a little more, then stops like he's testing how much he can handle.

God, he's never done this with a man before. I can tell from the way he's experimenting, testing. I'm his first. Every movement feels deliberate, curious. He's figuring it out while I'm falling apart under him.

I slide my hands into his hair on instinct, and then he sinks down and takes me deeper. His lips stretch around me, and I can feel the tight heat of his throat, the way his jaw moves when he pulls back and licks over the tip again before taking me in all over.

"So good," I whisper, biting down on my lip to keep the sound in.

His head starts moving faster, deeper. His tongue presses along the underside every time he pulls back, and when he sinks down again, one of his hands slides lower and starts playing with my balls. The other stays

wrapped tight around the base of my cock, keeping me right where he wants me.

The heat starts building too fast. My balls pull tight, and I feel the ache of it shoot through me like a warning.

“Mmh,” I gasp, hips twitching. “I’m gonna come soon.”

He doesn’t stop, just hums around my cock. That’s all it takes—that hmm.

My whole body tenses. And I let go.

My eyes slam shut, and I feel myself spill into his mouth, pulse after pulse, thick and hot and way too much. It’s been so long. He stays right there. Swallows and lets me come all the way down his throat.

When he finally pulls off, he licks along the tip once more before wiping the corner of his mouth with his thumb. Then he sucks it into his mouth, not wasting a single drop.

“Fuck, *zaychik*,” he murmurs. “I can’t get enough of you.”

I don’t even know what it means.

Leather scrapes through belt loops. He pushes his jeans down, his boxers too, and his cock falls free.

He’s uncut, thick, leaking pre-cum from the tip. My mouth waters. I’ve never seen anyone uncut before. I’ve never wanted anything more. The sight of him makes my chest tighten. When he takes his shirt off, I gasp. He looks unreal. Every muscle on him is carved out, abs sharp as hell, the kind of stomach only seen in movies. Six-pack, clear as day. At the clinic, I was too focused on the wound to really look. Now, I can’t look away.

My gaze drags lower and catches on the spot I stitched up, the skin still healing.

He holds his hand open in front of my face. “Spit.”

I spit into his palm, and he drags it back to his cock, smearing it over the head, stroking himself slow. His thumb circles the tip before pulling the foreskin down, and pre-cum slips, trailing over his fist and down toward my thighs. One of his hands lands hard on my knee, pinning me there.

I try to sit up. I want him in my mouth so bad, but he presses me flat against the bed.

“Stay down, *zaychik*.” His voice comes out rough, wrecked. “Open your mouth for me, tongue out. Keep your eyes on me while I come all over that pretty face and make you mine.”

The way he says it steals every thought out of my head.

“Say it,” he growls. “Say you’re mine.”

My throat goes tight. I blink at him and swallow, my chest rising fast. “I’m yours.”

The sound that tears out of him is raw, almost painful.

I stick out my tongue, keep my eyes on him. His body jerks. His cock swells, and then hot streaks spill out of him, hitting my chest, my throat, and my tongue.

He says something in Russian, voice lower now, almost broken.

He presses his mouth onto my skin, licks down my neck, over my chest, cleaning up every drop he left behind on my skin. The way his tongue drags across my ribs makes my entire body jolt. When he finally comes back up, he kisses me hard, making me taste the both of us on his tongue.

He drops beside me and pulls off his jeans and throws them onto the floor. He lies bare against the sheets, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

I glance over at him and let myself really look. His chest is still rising and falling, covered in tattoos all the way down to his stomach. Some are texts in Russian, but most are just scattered pieces, like a patchwork collage burned into his skin. There’s barely an inch of him that isn’t inked.

I follow the trail down his torso, across the ridges of his abs, then lower to his thighs.

His legs are fully covered too, ankles and feet, all of it black ink against pale skin.

My eyes catch on the tattoo over his heart: an eight-point star with skulls shaded through the middle. Out of all of them, this one sticks out the most because he has the same stars on his ring.

There has to be over a hundred tattoos on him, and I can’t wrap my head around the amount of pain that took. How many hours he must’ve sat through getting them, how long he’s been collecting all that ink like armor.

He glances at me. “See something you like?”

I blink, caught staring. “Why do you have so many tattoos?”

He’s like a literal work of art next to me with his abs and all the tattoos and muscles.

And then there’s me. I have no tattoos, no defined muscles, kind of skinny, just nothing special about my appearance.

I’ve never really cared before, but right now it hits different, lying here naked next to him, letting him see all of me. Insecurity sinks into my chest.

He could be with anyone he wanted, and somehow, he's here with me. It doesn't make sense.

"I was bored," he finally says.

"You were bored so you tattooed your entire body?" I scrunch my nose. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"*Nyet*. It's like meditation. Pain feels good."

So he's a slightly insane Russian masochist then. Got it.

He shifts onto his side and looks straight at me, his hand coming up to my chin slowly, lifting it just enough so I meet his gaze directly.

I brush my thumb over the tattoo under his eye. *Верность в молчании*. Cyrillic letters I can't read.

"What does this mean?"

"It means true loyalty doesn't need words. Family motto. We all have it tattooed somewhere. A reminder of what we are. What we owe."

I nod, trying to wrap my head around it.

"Kelly."

The way he says my name sounds like he's about to tell me this was a mistake.

"Do you remember what I told you at the club? That my family owns it and that the truth is always much worse."

"Yes."

He swallows hard. "You're mine," he says. "But my family has rules. If my father discovers I'm with a man, I won't survive it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I nod, suddenly parched.

"I've never been with a man before. Not until you, and now you're mine, *zaychik*. I'm not letting you go."

My breath catches in my throat.

"We need to watch ourselves. In your country, you can love whoever you want without consequences. But my family? My culture? It's different."

"You mean, mafia families?"

"You don't understand what the Avrorin name means. My family created the Russian underworld. We didn't join it, we built it from the ground up. Every rule, every system, every network from Moscow to New York exists because we made it that way. Generations of absolute power and control. Mafia is what people call organizations with someone above them. We answer to no one. We are the authority everyone else fears."

So mafia. I freaking knew it.

Except apparently, they're the mafia that other mafias are scared of. Cool. Great. But he's not answering the actual question.

"What does being with a man have to do with any of that?"

He sighs, then glances down my neck. "Because it's old blood and old rules passed down for generations."

I clear my throat. "They were probably made by men who were choking on cock behind closed doors and didn't want anyone else getting the same idea."

He smiles, and it hits me then that I've never seen him smile before. It is beautiful, transforms his entire face from cold and dangerous to something almost soft.

We end up spending the rest of the day curled up in bed after washing ourselves.

After we both get off again, slower this time, lazy and drawn out, we're completely wrecked. Everything catches up at once, and we're both passed out before eight, still wrapped around each other.

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Chapter 12

Kelly

A weird sound makes me open my eyes. Light filters through the curtains. I shut my eyes again and groan. The bed's cold behind me, Alexei's warmth completely gone.

I reach back and touch the mattress, then sit up and look around.

He's on the floor next to Clover's setup, sitting cross-legged while petting her and holding out a carrot. He's wearing one of my clean boxers that's bright pink and ridiculously tight on his muscular frame. I'm genuinely confused about how he squeezed into them without cutting off circulation.

Wait. I don't even have carrots in my fridge.

I squint. "Where did you get a carrot?" Then blink again. "And are those my boxers?"

He looks at me, deadpan. "*Da* to both."

I sit there for a second, trying to process this. "Okay, but where did the carrot come from?"

He scratches Clover's ears. "I went to the store and got it for her."

I rub my face, trying not to laugh because this man broke into my apartment to take care of me, raided my underwear drawer, and bought vegetables for my rabbit.

What is my life turning into?

I'm about to ruin this moment, but I have to say it. "Carrots aren't actually healthy for rabbits. They're really high in sugar."

He frowns. "They're not?"

"Yeah, I know it's confusing. But it should be more of a treat than a regular thing."

He pets her behind the ear gently. “What should I bring her then?”

I can’t help but smile because he’s genuinely asking, sitting there in my too-small pink boxers like this is a completely normal morning conversation.

“She’ll go through hay like crazy. Hay and pellets are her main diet, but romaine’s what she gets excited about.”

“Fine,” he says and goes back to petting Clover.

He doesn’t argue. Doesn’t tell me I’m wrong or that he knows better. Just accepts it and adjusts. David never did that. If I corrected him about anything, he’d find a way to make me feel stupid for it. Turn it around until I was apologizing for speaking up.

Alexei just … listens.

My stomach growls loudly. “Do you want to go out and get something to eat with me?”

It comes out quiet and nervous while I chew on my thumbnail and wait for his answer.

I see it immediately when his whole body goes stiff. He stops petting Clover and looks at me with that guarded expression.

“Kelly, I already told you. We need to be careful.”

I exhale loudly because my stomach hurts, and my head’s starting to throb. I get bitchy when I’m hungry and him saying that just makes it worse. I know this thing with him is complicated, but it’s just breakfast.

“You’re angry,” he says, tilting his head.

“No. I just need food.”

“But you’re injured. You can’t really go out like that.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Okay, I know we’re still getting to know each other, but if I say I’m hungry, it’s about a thirty-minute warning before it starts becoming everyone else’s problem. I’ll pop some painkillers. I told you it looks worse than it is.”

Please just let me have this.…

Let me pretend I’m okay and that David didn’t break something inside me. I’ve shoved it down as far as it’ll go, and I just need it to stay there.

He sighs and stands. “Fuck it. Get dressed. We’ll go out and get something nearby, but we need to be careful, *zaychik*.”

He listened. I told him what I needed, and he just … did it. No guilt-tripping me about ruining his plans. No making me feel like my needs are inconvenient.

It’s such a small thing. It shouldn’t mean this much.

But it does.

He gently scoops Clover back into her space and walks over to grab his jeans from the floor.

A weird, full-body excitement hits me. I jump off the bed and walk past him, grabbing clean boxers on the way to the bathroom. I brush my teeth and try to fix my hair. It’s a complete mess, but whatever, it’ll have to do.

I pull on a pair of faded gray jeans despite my body still aching and a brown sweatshirt, then start looking for my coat before glancing over at him.

He’s wearing dark jeans and the white thermal shirt again that makes my mouth water.

I glance down at myself, and just like that, the insecurity hits me hard. He’s so out of my league. I don’t understand what he sees in me.

He walks over to me and cups my face, fingers light on the bruised side. Kisses me hard, urgent, tongue pushing into my mouth before he catches himself. Then pulls me into a tight hug, but his hands are careful on my ribs.

He breathes in my scent, and I almost laugh because, regardless of whatever he sees in me, he clearly likes how I smell at least.

His lips find the bruise on my cheekbone. Soft. Careful. So different from the kiss a second ago.

“Come on, let’s go.”

He picks up my black coat from the floor, the one I’d forgotten I was even looking for before I spiraled into self-doubt, and hands it to me. Then he grabs a black leather jacket and shrugs it on.

We head out of the apartment. The cold air hits as soon as we step outside. We walk side by side toward a little café near my building. He opens the door while glancing at me. I step past him, feeling slightly out of place and exposed.

The warmth hits my face as we walk inside, and it smells like coffee and fresh pastries.

It’s bigger than I expected, cozy but not cramped, with booths lining the walls and a few tables scattered near the windows. Not overly busy right now with just a couple of people on laptops and someone reading a book in the corner.

We stand in line, and I catch people looking at him, then quickly glancing away like they're afraid to stare too long.

He looks terrifying, which is funny considering how gentle he was with me last night.

The barista is probably in her twenties. Her eyes go wide the second she sees him. She glances at his face, then not so subtly down at his chest, staring like she's trying to see through his thermal shirt.

I wish I could grab his hand and make it clear he's with me, except we're not even dating. We're something undefined and confusing as hell.

"What can I get you today?" she asks, smiling at Alexei.

The way she's completely ignoring me is already pissing me off. "I'll have a cheesecake muffin, one croissant, and a vanilla latte," I say, rolling my eyes.

She blinks like she forgot I was standing there. "Right. And for you?" she asks, turning back to him immediately.

I watch her eyes trail up his neck, then back down to his stomach. I'm about two seconds away from making a scene.

Alexei doesn't even acknowledge her existence. "Same," he says, pulling out his card without looking at her.

"Okay, we'll bring your order out when it's ready." She leans over the counter slightly, pushing her chest forward. "Oh, and those are free today," she adds, pointing at a glass tray full of cookies. "They're actually really good. We make them in-house."

Alexei barely glances at the tray before walking off toward the back. I follow him, trying not to let my irritation show.

We sit in a back booth. He takes off his leather jacket and hangs it over the back before settling across from me. I do the same and try not to act as awkward as I feel. It's weird being with him in public. Last night was his first time with a guy.

Does that make this experimental? Temporary?

Then the jealousy hits me hard. Does he sleep with women? Is that even something I'm allowed to ask? My brain won't stop spiraling.

He looks straight at me. "What is it, *zaychik*?"

"It's nothing. Just hungry, I guess." God, I'm the worst liar alive.

He shifts and brings one of his feet close to mine under the table, then taps it lightly.

"I don't like games. If you've got something to say, say it."

“I know we’re not, like, a thing,” I say, making air quotes with my fingers. “But you’re not sleeping with anyone else, right? Because I don’t think I’d be okay with that.”

His shoulders tense, and he glances around, checking to see if anyone heard me. But I meant what I said because I’m not doing this if I’m just one of many options.

He opens his mouth to respond, but his eyes flick up behind me.

“Here you go. I hope you like your order,” the barista says, setting our plates down. “I added one of those cookies to your plate, by the way. I just thought you might like them.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and keeps her eyes locked on him. “I wrote my number on the napkin. Call me if you’re single.”

I clench my fists on top of the table so hard my knuckles turn white. I catch Alexei glancing down at my hands, then back up at my face.

“Fuck off.” He picks up the napkin and hands it back to her without even looking at what she wrote. “Before I lose my patience and make you regret walking over here.”

She looks flustered and walks away quickly.

I open my mouth to say something, but he cuts me off.

“Kelly, I don’t share what’s mine. Someone touches you, they lose their hand. Someone looks at you wrong, they lose their eyes. You’re mine now, which means everyone else stays away or I make them disappear permanently.”

He grabs his croissant like he didn’t just casually threaten murder and takes a bite without breaking eye contact with me.

Ooooookay then. I guess I got my answer.

I scratch my head, then pick up my muffin and take a bite. The sweet taste makes my mouth water and grounds me a little. We sit there for a while eating in comfortable silence.

It feels surreal to be out with him like this, not exactly a date, but it still feels like we’re doing something dangerous together. Something that could get us both in a lot of trouble if the wrong people saw us.

He grew up thinking this was shameful. I’ll be patient while he unlearns that lie.

I nudge my foot against his, and he looks up. His mouth twitches with what might almost be a smile.

WINCING, I CLIMB THE FIRST STEP TO MY APARTMENT. GOING DOWN WAS fine, but apparently going up is a whole different torture. Alexei's hands are on my shoulders before I can take another breath.

"Let me carry you."

I look up the flight of stairs, then back at him. "What?"

He scoops me up before I can protest. I wrap my arms around his neck, gasping at how easily he lifts me.

"Thank you. No one's ever carried me like this before."

"Good," he says. "I plan to be the only one who gets to hold you like this."

Being carried up to my own apartment by an unhinged Russian who won't let me struggle up the stairs myself is weirdly … nice. I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips.

I glance at his face. He's not struggling at all, doesn't even look tired. I'd probably throw my back out and drop him face-first if I tried this.

He sets me down gently when we reach my door. His hand's already in his pocket, pulling out a key.

His key. To my apartment.

That he made without asking me.

I should say something. Should ask when the fuck he did that, why he thinks that's acceptable, what other boundaries he's planning to bulldoze through. But I don't.

Who does things like that?

He opens the door, and I walk in. Then he's on me. Instant. No space between us, his mouth against my neck, teeth scraping skin.

"Do you want to shower with me?" I ask while he works his way down my throat.

He hums against my pulse.

I'm taking that as a yes.

He shoves his tongue into my mouth and slams me into the wall, lifting me up. My ribs scream in protest, but I wrap my legs around him anyway, too lost in this to care about the pain. He carries me toward the bathroom.

Our mouths break long enough for him to strip me down, tossing my clothes onto the floor. His lips drag down my neck, across my chest, locking on my nipples.

He bites, sucks, licks, and my hands bury in his hair. I lean down and kiss the top of his head, can't help it.

Then he rips his clothes off, and my mouth actually waters. His inked body is ridiculous—uncut cock hard and heavy.

My chest tightens seeing all of him bare.

He returns for my mouth, but I push back his head with my hands in his hair. He looks back at me, hungry, and just … stops.

I'm sure the last person who told him what to do ended up in a shallow grave somewhere.

But right now, he's letting me hold him back. Waiting.

My chest does something weird. This man kills people for a living, and he's just letting me stop him. What I want actually matters to him. I tighten my grip in his hair, testing it. Seeing if this is real or if he's about to snap and take over like I expect him to.

He doesn't move. Just keeps watching me.

"I want you so bad …"

"Every part of me belongs to you. Take what's yours, *zaychik*."

His hand finds the shower knob behind me, water bursting to life as his lips crush mine, rough, easing me back into the tile. Hot water streams over our skin.

The way he told that girl to fuck off at the coffee shop and is clearly breaking his own rules for me by going out with me is seriously attractive. I don't know what's so special about me or why he chose me, but it's making me feel … important. Wanted.

For the first time in my life, I actually feel like the person I'm with wants me.

I just need to unlearn everything David beat into me. Every instinct that says I should be grateful for scraps. Every reflex that makes me apologize for existing. Every voice in my head that sounds like him telling me I'm lucky anyone puts up with me at all.

Alexei looks at me like I'm the only person in the room. Not the backup plan. Not the safe option. Not the guy who'll shut up and take whatever gets thrown his way.

Just … me.

I grab our cocks and work us over, moaning when I rub my thumb over my tip. The contrast between us—my cock smooth and his thick with foreskin—makes every stroke feel different, intoxicating. The way his

foreskin drags back and forth in my fist, sliding over the head with each pump, drives me insane. He holds me against the shower wall, one hand braced beside my head, the other gripping my hip as he grinds into my grip and fucks my hand like he's already inside me.

His eyes burn into me, dark and predatory. My head tips back against the wet tile, trapped in his gaze until he looks down between us. I follow his line of sight and watch my hand stroke us both—pre-cum leaks from our tips.

"This feels amazing," I gasp, my hand moving faster.

He leans in closer, his breath hot against my ear despite the steam. "I can't wait to fuck you, *zaychik*. I'll stretch you open on my fingers until you're shaking, begging for more, then fuck you until you can't remember anything but how good I feel."

A whimper tears out of me, and I pump us faster, desperate for more friction, more pressure, more of him. His tongue drags down my neck, hot against my wet skin.

"You want that?" he says, voice rough against my throat. "Want me inside you?"

"Yes," I choke out. "God, yes."

His hand leaves the wall and wraps around mine, guiding my strokes, making them rougher, faster. Our fingers tangle together around our cocks, slick with water and pre-cum, and the added pressure makes my vision blur.

"You're going to take every inch of me," he whispers, his teeth grazing my jaw. "I'm going to make you mine in every way that matters. Fuck you so deep you'll feel me for days."

"Please," I beg, not even sure what I'm asking for anymore. Just more. Everything.

When his teeth catch my earlobe and bite down hard, I shudder and nearly come.

He shifts his angle, grinding his cock against mine in our grip, and the friction is almost too much. "I'm going to ruin you for anyone else," he murmurs, voice rough and wrecked. "You'll never want another cock but mine."

"I don't," I gasp. "I only want you."

Something in his expression shifts, goes darker, more possessive. He crushes his mouth against mine, kissing me hard and filthy while our hands

work frantically between us. His tongue pushes deep, claiming every inch of my mouth while water streams over us both.

I'm so close. Every nerve is on fire, every stroke pushing me closer to the edge. He breaks the kiss and sinks his teeth into my neck, hard, marking me like I'm territory he's claiming.

"Come for me," he commands against my skin. "Let me see you fall apart."

That's all it takes. Heat coils tight in my stomach, my balls pull up, and I groan through it as I spill into our joined hands, cum mixing with the water running down our bodies. My whole body shakes with it, wave after wave.

He watches me the entire time, eyes locked on my face like he's memorizing every expression, every sound I make. Then he grinds into our grip twice more, jaw clenching, and releases with a rough groan. His cum spreads hot across my skin before the water washes it all away.

I drop my face into his shoulder and let him hold me, trying to catch my breath.

"*Zaychik*."

"Hmm?"

"I meant what I said earlier. About people staying away from you."

My brain takes a second to process that. I don't even know what to do with that information. I huff out a laugh and tilt my head back to look at him. His brown eyes are dead serious, no trace of humor anywhere.

"You can't just say things like that, Alexei."

"You needed to know."

"Normal people say 'I care about you' or 'You're important to me.'"

"I don't do normal."

No. No, he really doesn't.

His arms tighten around me, possessive and solid and so him that I don't even know what to do with it. This is probably the most romantic thing he knows how to say. Threats instead of feelings. Murder instead of love confessions.

Fucked up. But somehow it works.

"Okay," I say against his shoulder, too tired to unpack whatever the hell this means for us.

He hums, and I realize I just let a man threaten murder on my behalf without arguing.

I should probably be more concerned about what I just agreed to. Later. I'll worry about it later.

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Chapter 13

Alexei

What we did together just confirmed how fucked I am.

I'm going to get both of us killed, and I know it. I can't stop. The need consumes everything else. I got to taste him, and now there's no going back.

My phone keeps lighting up with missed calls. I turn it off. Turn it back on. Then off again. They know something is wrong. I never disappear like this. Never ignore them.

But I can't leave. Can't care about anything except the way Kelly looks at me, the way he tastes, the way he says my name. I am choosing him over everything I was raised to be. Over duty. Over survival.

And I still can't fucking stop.

If I could lock him in a room with no windows and doors, just me and him forever until the world forgets we ever existed, I would. The thought almost makes me smile.

When he fell asleep on me last night, I counted every single freckle on his face and memorized them so I can close my eyes and still see him when I'm not with him.

The way he looks at me when I touch him, the sounds he made, it's burned into my brain like a brand. I want to hear it again and again. Want to make him fall apart under my hands until he forgets his own name and knows only mine.

I should walk away right now while I still can, but the thought of leaving him makes my heart ache. He's mine now, whether he fully understands that or not, and I'd rather die than let anyone else have him.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Kelly’s voice cuts through my thoughts.

“Nothing,” I say, then pop another piece of pancake into my mouth.

I brought breakfast for us after my morning run. I’m not letting him starve himself to death just because he’s too stubborn to ask for help. I even scheduled groceries to be delivered every week since he survives on almond milk and whatever sad excuse for a sandwich he calls a meal, which is completely unacceptable.

He mumbles something into his plate.

I narrow my eyes. “You do that a lot. Say things low so I don’t hear. What is it, *zaychik*?”

“I said you look like you want to murder someone.” He swallows, jaw twitching. “Do you regret being with me?”

“*Nyet.* But I want to know the name of the lady who made you look like that so I can rip her head off.”

“Ugh, please not that again,” he mutters.

Judging by his face, that wasn’t the right thing to say. Most people don’t consider homicide comforting. I’m bad at this.

He stands with a wince, takes another bite mid-motion. I think he’s determined to eat and escape at the same time. The sound he makes when he moves is soft but strained, pain leaking out despite his attempts to hide it. He walks away from the bed with a slight limp, then bends slowly to scratch behind Clover’s ears.

I stare at his back, the way the morning light hits the curve of his spine through that thin T-shirt. The hem’s riding up just enough to show the waistband of those navy boxers.

That ass is going to be the death of me. I slip my finger into my mouth, tongue swirling around the syrup while I ogle without shame. My phone rings on the nightstand, and I sigh, already feeling the headache behind my eyes.

I pick it up, and the second I see my father’s name flash, I mutter a curse in Russian and tighten my grip around the phone.

Fuck.

Kelly looks over at me with immediate concern in his eyes. “What is it?”

I press the answer button, bring the phone to my ear, raising a finger to my lips for silence. He nods.

“Father,” I say.

“Your brother finally grew a spine and told me everything.” His voice is calm, too calm, which means he’s furious. “You had your chance. The moment it happened, you could have come forward, but the three of you stayed silent.” He exhales, then continues, “If you think I didn’t know, Alexei, you’re more foolish than I thought.”

He’s been sitting on this information the whole time, waiting for us to confess. I fucking knew it.

“Come home. We’ll have lunch. Your brothers will be here, and we’ll discuss this properly.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good.”

The line goes dead.

I stare at the phone. “*Polnyy yebannyy pizdets*.” Complete fucking disaster.

I toss it at the bed hard enough it bounces off and hits the floor with a loud thump. Kelly looks at me with concern written all over his bruised face.

I wave him off before he can start asking questions.

It’s not that I’m scared of my father exactly.

But he can be terrifying when he decides to be, and he’s decided to be plenty of times. He and my mother raised us well, gave us everything. Mother never laid a hand on us even when we were little shits testing every limit. Our father … had different methods.

I love him, love all of them despite their faults. Even Mikhail with his drug problems and constant chaos. People know us as this disciplined old family dynasty running the underworld.

Growing up with four brothers meant the house was never quiet. Someone was always in trouble, always getting punished, always plotting revenge on whoever got them into trouble. My mother spent most of her time playing referee or patching us up. They’re mine, my family, no matter how fucked up we all are.

But my father doesn’t bend on anything. Doesn’t listen to excuses. Lives by rules older than any of us, treats them like they were carved in stone. If he finds out I’ve been with a man, touching him, kissing him, getting him off, he won’t just disown me, he’ll destroy that part of me. Cut

it out like a tumor, burn it away until there's nothing left but what he thinks a son should be.

"I need to go. My father called a family meeting." I close my eyes. "That means someone fucked up badly enough that multiple people need to die for it. And he's going to make me do it."

"Stop," he says too loud, then winces. "Can we pretend you have a normal, boring desk job? Like you need to go to the office and handle paperwork or something?"

I blink at him. "My father's about to ask me to shove someone into the paper shredder until it breaks."

"That's not what people do at offices. You print papers and attend meetings. So go print some papers, and maybe we can meet later when you're done being a normal person with a normal job."

I scoff but play along because it seems important to him. "Fine. I'm going to the office to do some very important printing and filing. I don't know when I'll be back, and I probably won't answer my phone during business hours."

"Jesus Christ, okay. Close enough."

Kelly eyes me as I dress, biting his lip and holding onto Clover. "Just please don't break into any more vet clinics if you get hurt. Actually, no, don't get hurt at all. Wait, you're going to the office, and people don't get hurt at offices, so please just go have a boring, normal day, okay?"

If pretending what I do is normal office work makes him feel better, then I'll pretend for him. I hum and pocket my phone, walk over to him, scratch Clover between the ears, and then kiss him on his perfect lips.

I look at him right before I leave, and something cracks open inside me.

My stomach churns thinking about all the times I forced myself to fuck women, knowing everything about it felt wrong. I wanted to skin myself alive after. The disgust was so overwhelming that the aftermath became routine. I'd shower immediately, scrubbing my skin until it was raw and red, like I could wash away what I'd done.

Once was never enough. I'd go back in. Three times minimum, water scalding, soap burning into the raw patches. Still felt filthy. When I looked in the mirror, all I saw was a coward staring back, someone pretending to be something he wasn't.

I've been suffocating since I realized I wanted men. Kept telling myself it was just a phase, something that would pass if I tried hard enough. It

didn’t work. Just hollowed me out until I was a shell walking around pretending to be alive while everything real about me rotted inside.

I had good reason to keep pretending.

Part of me hoped death would catch up eventually, that one of those high-risk jobs I volunteered for would finally work. The ones nobody else wanted because the odds of walking out alive were zero. Would have been easier than going back to my world and listening to my father, every underboss who’s sat at our table, everyone I work with talk about how disgusting it is when men fuck men. A disease. Something that needs to be eliminated. Hearing that over and over while knowing that’s what I am.

I can’t go back to that. Not after having him. There’s no disgust now. No need to shower until my skin bleeds. No drowning in shame every time I look at myself.

All I feel is whole.

I PUSH OPEN THE BLACK DOOR TO THE HOUSE I GREW UP IN. MY BOOTS click against the marble floor as I walk in. The place is huge and cold, decorated exactly how my mother likes it with dark floors and gold accents everywhere.

Nothing’s changed since we moved here from Russia when I was a kid. We live about an hour outside the city on our own land, fenced in and guarded constantly. It started as just our parents’ house, but once we got older, Father had houses put up for each of us. Daniil and Mikhail refused and chose to stay in the city instead, living in that apartment together because those two can’t do anything the normal way. The house feels more like a crypt than a home sometimes. Black walls, dark everything with no warmth anywhere.

“Alexei.”

My mother, Lina, stands in the hallway with long black hair braided down her back, those bright blue eyes locked on mine. She looks so much like Mikhail and Yulian, it’s almost eerie. Lev and I got our father’s brown eyes and his face structure.

I walk over to her, and she pats my cheek with more force than necessary.

“How mad is he?” I ask.

She scoffs. “I don’t know what the three of you were thinking. Why didn’t you just go to him? You got shot. You could have died.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m fine.”

She smacks my shoulder hard. “That doesn’t make it better. You and your brothers are trying to kill me from high blood pressure. Why can’t any of you just stay out of trouble? And you’re the only one stubborn enough to refuse guards. Your brothers at least accept protection when they need it.”

I don’t need anyone following me around. I can protect myself, and I can’t have anyone discovering Kelly. Having guards means questions, reports back to my father, eyes on every move I make. They’d find out about the veterinary clinic, about him. Then everything would be over.

I’m protecting my secret by putting myself at risk.

She tsks when I don’t give her an answer, then gestures with her head for me to follow. I walk after her through the house. Our guards nod as we pass them.

She brings us to the dining hall with its massive black table sitting in the middle and chairs arranged around it.

My father, Roman, sits at the head of the table, eyes down on a tablet. Dark hair gone mostly gray now, tinted glasses on for the migraines. The black onyx crest ring catches the light when he moves his hand.

Lev, Yulian, Mikhail, and Daniil stand by the windows in a loose circle. They stop talking the moment they see me. Every one of them looks tense.

My father looks up and gestures to the chairs. “Sit. The chefs made stroganoff. We’ll eat, and then we’ll discuss what happened.”

Chairs scrape against marble as we sit at the same time.

The silence settles heavily. In this family, it never means anything good.

My mother walks over to my father. She puts her hands on his face, leans in, and says something low and soft. He shakes his head and tries to look away, but she pushes his chin toward her and says it again, firmer this time. He nods once, and she walks off to sit beside me. Her perfume hits me hard. She smells exactly like she did when I was a kid. She’s never changed it once in all these years.

Servers start coming in with our plates, setting them in front of us one by one without making eye contact, then disappear as quickly as they came. The room goes dead silent again except for the soft clink of silverware.

I glance at Mikhail. Great, he's completely wasted. This is going to be a fucking shitshow. He and Yulian can't be in a room together without someone getting hit. Actually, none of us are good at family gatherings. This whole family can't be in one place without it turning into a disaster. Fighting, yelling, someone storming out, or getting almost killed. It's a miracle we're still alive considering how we operate.

"Can we please stop behaving like we're at a funeral? Let's talk and eat," my mother says, cutting through the tension with her usual directness.

My father looks up from his plate, and his eyes sweep across all of us slowly.

Yulian scoffs and leans back in his chair. "Yeah, let's talk. Hey, Mikhail, how's life? Still a complete disaster, or did something change?"

Mikhail pushes his plate away hard enough that it scrapes loudly across the table. "Don't fucking start with me today."

Yulian grins. "Why not? It's family lunch. We're supposed to bond."

"We could bond over how much of a dick you are."

"Original. Did that take you all morning to come up with?"

I rub at my temple while they bicker and let out a deep sigh.

"No, it came naturally. Just like how being insufferable comes naturally to you."

Yulian smiles coldly. "I'd rather be insufferable than whatever mess you are."

"At least I'm an interesting mess. You're just boring."

"Boring? I'm the only one in this family honest enough to actually call out your drug problem instead of pretending it doesn't exist. Someone has to have the balls to say it."

Mikhail scoffs. "Stop pretending to care."

"I don't want you dead, Mikhail. Believe it or not, I'd prefer if you stuck around," Yulian snaps.

"Enough," Father shouts, voice carrying that hard warning we all recognize.

I brace myself for what's coming. Daniil pulls his hoodie further over his head with a resigned sigh. He already knows exactly how this ends.

"Let's just eat first, and then we can have this conversation like adults, yeah?" Lev says, already sounding exhausted.

"It was all Alexei's fault anyway. He fucked up at the warehouse," Mikhail snaps. Then shoves himself up from the chair so hard it tips back

and hits the marble floor with a crash. He runs a hand over his buzz cut with his blown pupils locked on me.

I raise an eyebrow. “What are you, five years old?” I pick up a glass and aim it right at his head.

He ducks just in time, and it smashes into one of those expensive-ass paintings behind him.

“You fucking dickhead! You almost took my head off!”

My father pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs.

Mother starts to say something, trying to calm everyone down.

Yulian pushes himself up from the table. “You are so stupid it’s actually comical. We knew instantly what went down and waited for one of you to grow a pair and speak up, but apparently that’s asking too much.”

I push myself up so fast my chair slams against the marble. “You want to keep your teeth? Then close your fucking mouth, Yulian. At least I don’t hide behind mind games like a pathetic little bitch.”

Mikhail cuts him off before he has a chance to reply. “You are all cowards. You’re always trying to blame everything on me. You always do this, all of you. It’s always my fault somehow. We scouted the place beforehand, and you still went in there knowing something was off, then you got shot like an idiot.”

I scoff. “Maybe I actually thought I could trust my brothers for once to do something right instead of messing up.”

“Please stop this. Why can’t any of you be like Daniil?” Mother cuts in, her voice tired and strained. “Look at him, he’s the only one who knows how to behave. He never argues like the rest of you animals. Why can’t you just sit and have a normal family lunch for once in your lives?”

“Because he’s fucking adopted. Maybe you should’ve adopted the rest of us too, since the only normal one here didn’t come out of your body,” I yell.

The words hang in the air for a split second before her eyes widen. It plays out in slow motion. She takes off her red heel and hurls it straight at my head with accuracy. I duck. It smashes into a sculpture behind me, sending pieces flying across the floor.

I crossed the line, not that I care. She doesn’t tolerate anyone mentioning Daniil’s adoption. Ever.

I glance at Father, expecting something. But he just watches, unmoved, and rubs his jaw, watching all of us as if we’re insects under a microscope. I

think he’s trying to decide if he wants to murder his own family or just let us destroy each other. If she wanted to throw the other shoe at me, he’d let her.

“Can we please just calm down now?” Lev yells.

“No, I will not fucking calm down! You need to stop blaming me for everything that goes wrong,” Mikhail snaps.

“But you’re always the one that screws things up. I mean, look at your pupils, Mikhail. What did you take this time?” Yulian fires. “I’m sure it was some nice cocktail of everything, and I’m seriously surprised you haven’t overdosed yet.”

I curse under my breath and tense up.

Mikhail clenches his fists and cracks his neck. That’s his tell—he’s about to completely lose it.

The drugs mean this is about to go from loud family argument to something deadly. His martial arts training alone is dangerous. Add whatever he’s high on, and he’s not just fast, he’s completely uncontrollable.

I circle the table, trying to reach him, but he’s faster. Three steps and he’s on Yulian, sweeping his legs out and slamming him onto the marble.

I lunge for his fists, but he catches my shirt, hooks the back of my knee in the same motion, and yanks me flat onto my back. He spins and drives a punch into Yulian’s face before anyone can react. I scramble up to stop him again.

A gunshot cracks across the dining room.

“My ceiling!” Mother screeches.

I look over at my father. He stands calmly with a gun, still aimed at the ceiling. I glance up at the fresh hole right next to all the others. He always aims for the same spot when he wants us to shut up and stop.

There are already fifteen bullet holes clustered up there, two of them from last New Year’s when Yulian completely lost his mind at Lev.

“If you’re done acting like children, we have actual work to discuss,” Father says, placing the gun on the table and sitting. “Sit. *Now*.”

His voice echoes through the room. Everyone immediately stops what they’re doing. Chairs get picked up, clothes get straightened, everyone moves to their seats without another word.

I have to stop myself from smiling when Yulian wipes blood from his nose.

The chair vibrates under me from Mikhail's foot tapping frantically, trying to keep whatever cocktail of stimulants is still burning through his system under some kind of control.

"The Nozares family has been testing our boundaries for months. We've eliminated their attempts, but Santiago overstepped when he targeted our operations. The old fool put a contract on the escort services."

His eyes fixate on me. "You and Calder will hit their stash house tomorrow night. Extract whatever intel you can find about this leak, then eliminate everyone on site. Clean sweep. I want to know who's betraying us before we move on to Santiago."

I nod and keep listening while he outlines the rest. Target locations, backup plans, exit strategies. Even my mother sits quietly with that tense expression she gets when family business turns lethal. Father keeps us all working. Gives each of us operations to run so we stay busy and the empire stays tight.

Lev's stuck with the ports. Shipping, imports, paperwork. He hates it, but he's good at making dirty money look clean.

Yulian runs that restaurant and Vespera, his escort service. Father thinks it's beneath us, but Yulian's too good at gathering information and making money for him to shut it down.

Mikhail handles the clubs. Money laundering, mostly. We cash for smaller families, and they pay us for it. Keeps them dependent. Daniil works with him on all the tech side—databases, security tracking.

I handle all the problems. The ones that need to disappear.

But that's not what keeps us on top. The real power is Father's investment firm.

Old Russian money that survived the Soviet collapse. Manages billions for oligarchs, politicians, anyone who matters. He can freeze accounts, bury secrets, destroy lives with a phone call. Never has to leave his office. The ports and the clubs are just the arms. The investment firm is the heart. And we control every beat.

The meeting drags on for another hour. I find myself thinking about Kelly waiting at his apartment. I won't make it back tonight, not with the prep and the reconnaissance before tomorrow.

The thought of him sitting there alone, probably worried sick about where I am, makes something twist uncomfortably in my gut. But this is the

life I chose, the family I was born into. Kelly's going to have to learn that sometimes the family business keeps me away longer than expected.

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Chapter 14

Alexei

My fingers tap against the side of my thigh while crouching behind cover. My eyes locked on the stash house my father wants cleared and searched for intel.

It's somewhere past midnight. The compound sits about two hours outside the city. Lit up like a damn Christmas tree with floodlights covering every angle. Shipping containers are stacked around the fenced lot. Calder and I counted at least eight guards outside, probably more inside handling the actual product.

I push to my feet and glance over at Calder. He's checking his weapons. We're both wearing the tactical gear we use for jobs like this, loaded for a firefight in case things go sideways.

His tattoos make him look even more disturbing in the shadows, his shaved skull covered in some nightmare design of skulls that morph into screaming faces with blacked-out eyes. The ink bleeds down his forehead and onto his chin like blood dripping from a fresh wound. I don't understand how Yulian can call him his best friend. I'm fucked up, but Calder's in a category of his own.

I crack my neck and roll my shoulders. "Let's just get this over with."

He hums in agreement. We start moving along the path we mapped out earlier, staying in the tree line to avoid the lights. We cut through the chain-link fence with bolt cutters and crawl through the gap, then split up to handle the perimeter guards.

I pull my knife and move in behind the first man, clamp a hand over his mouth, and slice his throat in a smooth motion. I keep the sound trapped in

my palm while blood runs down his neck, then lower him to the ground and drive the knife into his back to make sure he stays down.

The next guard goes just as quietly.

Across the lot, Calder makes his kills unnecessarily complicated. He's grinding his boot into some guy's skull long after the man stopped breathing. He can never just kill efficiently and move on.

Two guards patrol near the shipping containers. The first one turns, sees me. Reaches for his gun. I close the distance before he can draw, grab his wrist, twist until bones crack. He opens his mouth to scream. I drive my palm into his nose until bones crunch. He goes down.

The second guy swings at me. I duck under his arm, sweep his legs, drive my boot into his throat. Once. Twice. Until he stops moving. Then I slit both their throats.

We clear the outside without raising any alarms, then approach the main warehouse. Through the cargo door, I count seven more targets moving around inside. I hold up seven fingers to Calder. He nods, grinning manically.

The warehouse is packed with shipping crates and stolen cars and makeshift office spaces built into the back corner. Tables line the center of the space, covered in stacks of cash and vacuum-sealed bricks of product waiting to be distributed.

I grab the first guard from behind, clamp my hand over his mouth, and sink my knife into his kidney. He screams into my palm. I yank the blade out and stab until he goes limp. I drop him and wipe my knife on his shirt.

I crack my neck and move toward the next target, but he spots me and opens his mouth to shout. I flip my knife and drive it up through his jaw into his skull, grabbing his shoulder to lower him quietly to the ground while stabbing him over and over again into his jaw.

Across the warehouse, Calder's stalking his own target. He kicks the back of the man's knee out, drops him hard, then slits his throat while catching the body before it goes down.

I keep moving behind cover and spot three more targets grouped near the cash tables. Two are talking while the third stands behind them with an AR, keeping watch.

Calder appears beside me without a sound and studies the three men. "The one with the rifle. He's left-handed but holding it wrong. Nervous. New to this. He'd break in under three minutes."

“Go distract one. I will take the other two. You can do whatever you want to the one you distract.”

His mouth curves slightly. “This is why I don’t mind working with you.”

I grunt and take position behind a stack of crates.

One of the men separates to check a noise. I grab his head, twist hard and fast. Neck snaps. He drops. The other guard sees me, brings his AR up, shouts.

I throw my knife. Blade sinks into his throat before sound comes out. He stumbles backward, clawing at the handle. I close the distance, yank the knife free, drive it under his ribs. He goes down gurgling.

When it’s done, Calder’s leaning against a post with the third guard on his knees, hands zip-tied behind his back. Blood drips from the man’s nose. “Would have been more fun to have a chat with all of them.”

I wipe the blood on my pants. “We’re not here so you can experiment. Focus. We need information, not a fucking show.”

He grins. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a joy to be around?”

I bite the inside of my cheek and try to keep my temper under control. “Just get information from him and then kill him.”

I walk into the office area. Spot a metal staircase leading downstairs. Wait, this wasn’t on the layout Daniil gave us. This is something that’s not supposed to exist according to our intelligence.

I call Calder over. He approaches with blood splattered across the visible parts of his face, the rest hidden under layers of black ink.

We stare down the narrow staircase. I pull out my weapon, clicking the safety off, and he does the same. We descend one step at a time with guns raised until I stop mid-step and lift my gloved hand to cover my nose. The stench hits like a physical wall, making my eyes water. Calder just shrugs and keeps moving down.

I follow, still covering my face, into a large basement room lined with white folding tables. There’s a door in the back, closed, probably leading to another section. In the center, there are more drugs and cash stacked high, but along the back wall, there’s a row of heavy metal cages—the industrial kind used for large animals.

Someone’s slumped inside one of them, their body twisted at odd angles. Next to that cage, I see the source of the smell. Bodies are stacked like cordwood, all in different stages of decomposition.

A sudden blast of music echoes from behind the closed door. Some kind of death metal.

I raise my weapon higher, let go of my nose despite the stench. Then move toward the sound. The smell worsens.

I nudge the door open with my gun and look inside. Seven men sprawled across black leather couches with multiple naked women around them. Some dancing to the music, others drinking or snorting lines off glass tables.

I make the hand signal for multiple targets.

Calder nods and moves, but I grab his arm before he can alert them. “Work through the men first. They’re armed.”

“Roman said no survivors.”

“*Da*. Men first.”

I drop three men before anyone reacts. Calder takes the left side and puts down two more. Screaming erupts, and the women scatter, but instead of running for cover, they grab guns from the fallen guards and take us by surprise, opening fire.

“Fuck! I got hit,” Calder shouts.

I move through the chaos and drop the last two runners. The room falls silent, and I scan for threats, find none. Glancing over at Calder, he points to where he took a round in his vest and shakes his head with a scowl.

Father’s orders were clear. No survivors. Kill everyone.

Bringing the girls to Yulian would have been an option. He runs Vespera, and he’s good to his girls, doesn’t force them into work they don’t choose. They’d have protection, a chance to disappear into something safer than this. But they sealed their fates when they decided to target us and try to kill us, which means they would never have been loyal to us and would have turned on us the first chance they got, given our enemies information about us.

Calder turns his focus on me, dissecting me with his eyes. “Your form’s off. Technique’s fine, but your head’s somewhere else. What’s wrong?”

My jaw clenches at his comment. I pull my knife, flip it once, and throw it past his head. The blade grazes his ear on the way by. He doesn’t move. Reaches up slowly, wipes the blood with his finger, licks it off. “Good aim.”

One day, I won’t miss on purpose.

I walk to the desk and start pulling files from the drawers, stacking them without reading through everything. Just grab whatever looks useful and

toss it onto the pile.

Calder returns with more papers and drops them on top of my stack without saying anything. We work efficiently together even when he's being a pain in the ass.

I text my father.

ME:

First location cleared, torching soon. Moving to phase two.

WE ENDED UP TORCHING THE STASH HOUSE AFTER COLLECTING BOXES OF documents, then took care of the three names on Father's list. But I have one more target I need to handle. Someone who wasn't part of the original mission.

I park outside a gray, run-down house. Red pickup truck in the driveway. Somewhere past dawn but still early enough that the neighbors aren't awake. We dumped the other car and switched to one of our clean vehicles with untraceable plates, so I'm not worried about being identified.

"He was not on the list," Calder says, tilting his head against the passenger seat, studying the house.

"*Nyet*." I rub my jaw. "Do you think you can actually drown someone in a toilet?"

"What, like theoretically? Or are we talking practically?"

"Practically. How would someone actually do that?"

He considers it and rubs his jaw with his tattooed hand. "You would need to keep their head submerged. Continuous water supply. Force their face down into the bowl, boot on the back of their neck for leverage. Flush repeatedly. Water keeps rising, nowhere to drain while their head is blocking it." He pauses, then a disturbing smile spreads across his face. "Fuck. That is diabolical. Technically, yeah. Could definitely work."

"How long would it take?"

"Few minutes, depending on lung capacity and how much they fight. But it would work." He looks over at me, curious now. "Why the toilet specifically? Bathtub would be easier. More water capacity."

"It has to be the toilet."

"Interesting choice." He studies me for a moment. "Very specific."

I reach for the door handle.

“You are really committed to this method.” He tilts his head. “Not your usual style.”

“Does it matter?”

“Not really.” He folds his arms. “Can I watch?”

“Why?”

“I want to see if the method actually works as well as I think it will. Professional curiosity.”

I shrug and push the car door open.

Brent Cole Lawson shoved Kelly’s head in a toilet and called him a faggot in high school, laughed about it, made other people laugh, thought it was funny. I’m returning the favor. Hold him under until he drowns, let him choke on the same filth. Karma has a sense of humor too.

Calder walks beside me toward the house. “How are we getting in? Front door? Window?”

“Front door. I don’t care about being subtle.”

“Even better.” He pulls out his knife, testing the weight. “I will clear the house while you grab the target. Make sure no one interrupts.”

I will kill a man for looking at him wrong, but I won’t tell my own family he exists. What kind of sense does that make?

None. But here I am anyway.

Kelly pretends it’s fine. Says he understands why I keep him hidden. But he shouldn’t have to pretend anything. Shouldn’t have to be my secret while I tear apart anyone who hurts him. I’m doing this for him whether he wants me to or not.

He doesn’t have to know. Doesn’t even have to say thank you. All he has to do is keep existing and keep letting me near him.

I will handle everything else. It’s the only thing I know how to give him.

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Chapter 15

Kelly

My hands shake while I go through the stack of fines. They actually filed a ticket for biking without a light even though I did have one. It broke when he slammed his squad car into my bike. I'm drowning in debt now because of him and his partner.

Now David's contacted some judge about all the parking tickets he used to keep sticking on my car. Got so bad I sold the car just to make it stop. That was four months ago, and now he wants a judge to come after me for the unpaid dues? I'm not giving him that satisfaction.

I let out a deep sigh and rest my face in my hand. I don't even know what to do at this point. I don't think he'll stop until I'm completely destroyed or dead.

There's no way I'm taking this to Alexei. He could help somehow, but I'm too ashamed to explain what really happened. How I was stupid enough to let David treat me like that for so long. How I kept making excuses for him.

Maybe I deserved some of it. I should have left the first time he hit me instead of believing him when he cried and promised it would never happen again.

He started off so sweet, so charming. Everyone loved him. Only my mom didn't buy his act. I wish I'd listened to her. That's what made it so confusing when he started changing the rules. When loving him meant walking on eggshells and apologizing for things I didn't even understand I'd done wrong.

First it was just wanting to know where I was all the time. Then controlling who I could see. Next, the yelling started. Then he threw the

bottle, and I told myself it was just one time, that he was stressed about work.

But it kept getting worse. And I kept staying. Kept believing him when he said he was sorry, that he loved me, that I was the only good thing in his life.

Even when sorry stopped meaning anything. Even when love started feeling like fear.

I finally left after he broke my arm, but only because the look in his eyes afterward scared me more than staying ever had. I knew if I didn't run then, he was going to kill me eventually.

And now he's making sure I pay for leaving. Making sure I know that even broken, even gone, I'm still his to destroy whenever he wants.

A knock at my door drags me out of my spiral. I toss the papers onto my desk.

I peek through the peephole. A delivery guy? Probably got the wrong address, because I didn't order anything.

I open the door. "I think you've got the wrong apartment. I didn't order anything."

The guy pulls out a paper from his pocket and squints. "Nope. Says Kelly Francis Mackey, apartment 6A."

"Maybe it's a mistake?"

He sighs. "No mistake. Just sign the paper, buddy. I need to go back to the truck and get the bike too."

Bike?

"What bike?"

He basically throws the clipboard and pen at me, then jogs down. I stare at five different grocery bags, all filled to the top with actual food.

The man, in his forties maybe, returns with a sleek black bike that looks more expensive than three months of my rent.

My eyes go wide because yeah, I've been a little out of it since I got hurt. But there's no way I accidentally ordered a week's worth of groceries and a damn bike when I'm broke as hell and can't afford any of this.

He drops it right in front of my door. Yanks the clipboard from me which I haven't even signed and mutters something. Then walks off.

I scratch my head and stare down at everything scattered around my doorway.

Did Alexei do this? But why would he buy me groceries and a new bike when I didn’t even tell him I left my mangled one somewhere on the street after David and Mendez destroyed it.

I wipe my hands over my face and let out a frustrated sigh, then start dragging everything inside. I unpack all the food and shove it into my fridge, my hands shaking slightly.

What does he want from me? People don’t just buy expensive things for nothing. There’s always a price. There’s always something they expect in return.

Is this how it starts?

Nice gestures that make me feel grateful, make me feel like I owe him something? David used to bring me flowers after he hurt me. Said it proved he loved me.

I don’t need Alexei buying me things like I’m some charity case. I can take care of myself. But what if saying no makes him angry? What if he’s keeping track of everything he’s spent and expects payback later?

I’m so anxious about the whole situation, so afraid of what this means, that when I’m done putting all the groceries away, I walk to the bathroom and turn the shower to cold, rip off my clothes, and step under the freezing spray to shock myself out of this spiral.

The water hits my bruised skin. I hiss, but I don’t adjust the temperature. I need to feel something other than this paranoia that people only help when they want something back.

I STEP OUT OF THE SHOWER AND GRAB MY TOWEL TO DRY OFF. THE COLD water did absolutely nothing to help me process this insane Russian who entered my life and flipped it completely upside down. He constantly violates my privacy and made a spare key behind my back, which I chose to just ignore like a complete idiot.

I groan at being unable to find my hairbrush. Seriously? I swear all my things have been disappearing lately. Maybe I’m finally losing it.

I step out of the bathroom, and the insane Russian in question is standing in my kitchen holding Clover and eating something from my fridge.

I stare at his bare feet and gray jeans from behind, then up to a black T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. *No, don't get distracted by his looks.*

"Did you order groceries? And a bike?"

He turns around and keeps petting Clover while chewing something. There's a gash on his left arm that definitely needs stitches. I have to fight the urge to patch him up again.

"Why would you do that?"

"You are angry."

"Yes, I'm angry. I can afford my own things, you know."

"You can't survive on grapes and almond milk."

"What?"

He stares at me. Flat. Unimpressed. He is looking at me as if I'm the unreasonable one when he's the one breaking into my apartment and making decisions about my life without asking.

"You need food. Real food, not grapes and cheap sandwiches. Your bike's been missing since that woman cut you off and you crashed. I noticed."

"Why would you do this? I didn't ask you to."

He puts Clover down gently and walks toward me. I automatically take a step back before I can stop myself. Something flickers across his face when he notices, but he doesn't comment on it. He keeps moving until he's close enough to place his hand under my chin and lift it until I'm forced to look into those dark eyes. My heart hammers against my ribs, but I don't pull away.

"*Zaychik*." His thumb brushes my jaw. "This isn't up for debate. I want to take care of you. I've never begged for a single thing in my entire life, but I will beg you for this. Please. Just let me do this for you."

My breath catches as his hand cups my balls through the towel. Before I can say anything, he crashes his mouth onto mine. His other hand grips the back of my head, pulling me harder into him. My mouth parts on instinct, and he uses it to push his tongue inside.

My cock swells so fast it presses against the towel. He grabs my thighs and lifts me up. My legs lock around his waist, my arms around his neck. He doesn't break the kiss as he carries us to my bedroom and lays me down carefully on the mattress.

His hands go straight to his belt. He unbuckles it, drags his pants and boxers down just far enough to free his hard cock, leaving the rest hanging

loose.

He pulls his T-shirt off, and my mouth waters at the sight of his six-pack on full display.

Whatever I was mad about disappears when he looks at me like he plans to devour me.

He drops to his knees and grabs my hips, pulling me closer, lifting my thighs until my ass is fully exposed.

He licks his lips and starts kissing around my balls. Heat spreads as his tongue drags over my skin before he sucks one slowly. I reach down to stroke myself, desperate for something. His head snaps up, and he swats my hand away.

“Not yet.”

I actually want to whine. I’m so desperate to touch myself.

He goes directly back to licking my balls, then further down.

“That’s so good … please don’t stop,” I whimper.

His hands slide under my ass, then up around my hips. He pulls me harder into him and buries his face between my cheeks. His tongue works me open, swirling and pushing inside of me. His stubble scratches against skin with every movement.

I’ve never had anyone do this to me before. It’s overwhelming—every nerve ending on fire. Pleasure I didn’t know existed.

I try to contain the moan, but I can’t. Not when I feel one of his fingers press against the tight ring of muscle and slowly push inside. I gasp from the pleasure.

His tongue keeps swirling around my hole while he works his finger in and out. When it hits against my prostate, I gasp again. Pre-cum leaks out of me, dripping onto my stomach. My hands go to my cock again. I glance down at him, searching for permission. His deep brown eyes stare back at me while he thrusts his tongue in and out of my hole. He nods.

I spit in my hand and grab myself, stroking in time with his movements. Each tug makes me feel like I’m about to erupt. He pushes against my prostate again, tongue and finger working together, stretching me open.

The pressure builds, coiling tighter and tighter. My cock stiffens. I gasp his name as warm cum shoots across my chest. I collapse back, trying to catch my breath, my vision blurring from the intensity. His tongue drags up my stomach, licking up the mess I made.

The sensation makes me chuckle breathlessly. He works his way higher—across my chest to my nipple. Bites it gently and then moves over and bites my other one gently. Then he's on me, mouth crashing into mine, making me taste myself on his tongue.

His hard cock presses against my chest. He reaches down, gathers what's left on my stomach, and smears it over his cock. Starts jerking himself, eyes locked on mine the entire time.

"You taste incredible, *zaychik*. I'm never getting enough of this."

He groans, eyes shut tight. Hot spurts of cum hit my chest, then my neck. His forehead drops against mine. He stays hovering over me, careful not to press against my injuries.

He walks off and returns with a warm washcloth. Cleans me first, careful and thorough, fingers brushing over the bruises like he's checking them. Then he cleans himself quickly and climbs into bed.

We eventually end up curled together with our feet tangled, my head resting on his chest while his arms wrap around me. I listen to his heartbeat, and the steady rise and fall of his breathing soothes me enough that I'm about to drift off to sleep.

"You know you can't just shut me up with an orgasm every time I get mad at you," I mutter. "What does *zaychik* mean by the way?"

He presses his lips against my forehead. "Little bunny."

Oh.

There's something about how gentle he is with me that's making me remember what it felt like before David taught me that kindness comes with a price. He's awakening this fragile, terrifying hope that maybe someone can want to take care of me without wanting to destroy me. The feeling spreads warmth through my chest, and I'm not sure if I should trust it or run from it.

"That's actually kind of sweet," I admit quietly against his skin.

He hums. "You are small, soft, and mine."

I keep smiling like an idiot against his chest. God, he's solid. The muscle underneath my cheek makes me want to just melt into him.

"Did you like the bike?"

"Yeah." I pause. "I just … I'm not used to people buying me things. It's a lot. But thank you."

His hand moves through my hair. "You don't like gifts?"

“It’s not that. It’s just …” I struggle to find the words. “Nobody’s ever just given me something like that before. Without expecting anything back.”

“I don’t expect anything back.”

“I know. That’s what makes it weird.” I huff out a laugh against his skin. “Good weird, though.”

He doesn’t answer, but I know he’s working through it in his head. I shift topics before he can ask more questions. “Will you tell me something? I like hearing your voice. Tell me something about your family.”

“My older brother Yulian has this ancient hoodie he’s weirdly attached to. Uses it as a pillow, holds it when he’s stressed. He came at me once for touching it, so I threw him through a window. Shattered the whole thing. Still don’t know what that’s about, but I’m saving that information for the right moment.”

A smile tugs at my lips, then his words register. “Wait, what do you mean saving that information? For what?”

“It’s ammunition for blackmail,” he murmurs. “Mikhail and Daniil used to steal our weed when they were teenagers. They’d sneak out to the roof and smoke, thinking they were clever. I could smell it from my room the whole time. Yulian blamed me and Lev for months. I let him. That one’s for the next time Mikhail pisses me off.”

It sounds exhausting having so many brothers. I was definitely made to be an only child. I’ve never been in a position where I needed blackmail material on anyone, but I have to admit, it sounds kind of fun.

“Are you close with all your brothers?”

“*Da*, I guess. We clash constantly. Too many big personalities in one family. Yulian runs his mouth, Mikhail gets physical and follows Daniil around like a lost puppy, Lev tries to control everything, and I just want everyone to shut up. Someone’s always angry at someone else.”

“Your family sounds intense.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” he says, and I can hear the dry amusement in his voice.

“What about your mom?”

“She’s tough. Keeps everyone in line, my father included. No one else can do that.” His voice warms slightly. “She throws these big parties for all our birthdays and hosts fancy brunches with wives from other families that work under us.”

Right. I definitely don’t need more details about international crime family networks.

“Tell me something about yourself from when you were younger. I want to know more about you.”

I go rigid against him. Panic rushes through my brain, scrambling for something to say. That I was the loser in high school everyone picked on, the nerd who studied instead of going to parties because nobody invited me anyway?

“I was the captain of the math team,” I say and then immediately wince. Of all the things I could’ve said, that’s what came out.

“Math team?”

“Um, yeah. We had these competitions against other schools, and we always won. Thanks to me, actually.” I’m making this worse. “I was really good at calculus and probability problems. Could solve them faster than anyone else.”

He’s quiet for a second, and I can feel my face burning. Great. Now he knows I’m a complete nerd.

“That’s impressive.”

I blink. “Really?”

“You were the best at something. Led a team to victory. That takes skill.”

“It was just math competitions. Not exactly cool.”

“Who gives a shit about cool? You were good at it.”

The way he says it, so matter-of-fact, like being captain of the math team is actually something worth mentioning instead of the social death sentence it was in high school, makes something warm settle in my chest.

“Thanks,” I mutter against his skin. “Though I’m pretty sure that makes me the least interesting person you’ve ever met.”

“You’re not boring, Kelly.”

“I literally just told you my biggest achievement in high school was solving math problems.”

“You accomplished something real. I dropped out and went straight into the family business. What you did actually matters.”

I nod against his skin. The rise and fall of his chest should calm me, but instead I feel like I’m standing on the edge of something that’s going to swallow me whole.

I’m so scared. Of waking up one day and him realizing I’m not worth the effort. That all this was just borrowed time, something he’ll grow tired of when he sees what I really am underneath. That I’m pathetic.

I’ve spent so long being someone’s mistake that I don’t know how to be someone’s choice. Don’t know how to believe I could be. And when he leaves, not if, when, because people like me don’t get to keep people like him, I’ll still be here. Still broken. Still the person nobody stayed for. And this time it’ll hurt worse because for a little while, I let myself believe it could be different.

I press my face harder into his chest, breathing him in, trying to memorize the way his arms feel around me. The warmth. The safety. All of it. Because soon this will just be another thing I had and lost, and I need to remember what it felt like to be held like I mattered, even if it was only for a moment.

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Chapter 16

Alexei

"I have an idea."

I lift my eyes from my UNO cards and glance at Mikhail. "Keep it to yourself. Your ideas have a perfect track record of being fucking terrible."

"Shut up." He throws another card onto the pile with more force than necessary.

Daniil's shoulders shake with quiet laughter. He adds a card of his own to the growing pile.

We've been playing this game since we were kids. Mikhail's still a sore loser, always has been. He can't handle losing at anything, especially not at UNO where luck plays too big a role for his liking. Daniil always cheats at this game; I can't prove it, but he always fucking wins.

I could tell Mikhail first about Kelly. He's drowning in his own chaos, won't have the energy to judge mine. Work my way through the family from easiest to hardest, let them process it one at a time. Or just rip the bandage off and tell them all at once. Call a meeting, lay it out, deal with whatever comes after. Father's going to lose his shit either way.

I don't know how to do this without destroying everything.

I'm a coward. Plain and simple. I'll put a bullet in someone's skull without blinking, but I can't tell my own father I'm gay. Kelly thinks it doesn't matter, that he understands, but I see it in his eyes sometimes. The question of whether I'm ashamed of him. I'm not. I'm ashamed of myself.

We're sitting in Ozero, our recently opened club. Waiting for our father to show up because he's supposed to tell us what he found in the files Calder and I pulled from the stash house. Kelly had to go to work, and I

was bored, so I might as well sit through this meeting even though all I want right now is to bury my face between his thighs and make him fall apart with my tongue.

Mikhail's running this and our other three clubs for our father. He's actually doing a decent job. Even if I wasn't sure how it would work with his drug problems constantly getting in the way. A memory of talking to Kelly here for the first time after the clinic incident hits me.

I bite on my tongue, trying to shove it out of my head.

"Did you hear me?"

"No, but I'm sure whatever you said was stupid."

Mikhail throws all his cards into the middle of the table, sending them scattering everywhere, then rises from his chair and points a finger at me. "I said I have an idea how we can fuck with Yulian."

I rub at my temple. "Imagine that. The thing I said would be stupid turned out to be stupid."

"I want to prank him."

I scoff. "Why can't the two of you just leave each other alone?"

"He starts it. Ask Danya, he'll tell you."

I glance over at Daniil who rubs at his temple and shakes his head.

"This family is exhausting," I mutter.

He opens his mouth to snap back, but the doors open, and our father walks in.

He raises his eyebrows at all the cards scattered across the conference table, then looks at Mikhail, who suddenly goes sheepish and drops his hand while straightening up fast.

I whisper, "Pussy," in his direction. He gives me a death glare, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from saying something that'll get him in trouble.

Our father comes and sits down at the head of the table, glancing between us with the faintest smile. "I remember you all playing this when you were young, though I can't say I miss the screaming and the fights that happened every time one of you won."

"You mean because someone can't handle losing." I glance over at Mikhail, who glares at me but doesn't say anything back.

Father huffs a quiet laugh, then continues, "I sent Lev, Yulian, and Calder to Vegas to handle the expansion. They won't be here for this meeting. The documents you retrieved were more valuable than expected because they confirmed someone with police background is working with

the Nozares family, feeding them information about our activities. We don't have names yet, but we know it's a retired detective with access he shouldn't have." He points at me. "I have additional targets for you to handle."

He shifts his attention to Daniil without missing a beat. "There are police files I need analyzed for patterns and connections. Take Mikhail with you because two sets of eyes catch what one might miss."

More like he wants Daniil to babysit Mikhail and keep him from doing anything stupid, but I don't say that out loud.

"Intelligence suggests Santiago's sons are questioning his leadership, creating internal fractures in their organization." He drums his fingers against the table. "Unconfirmed, but if true, it creates opportunities we can exploit to our advantage. What's concerning is Omar Nozares's cartel tried to hit one of our shipping containers last week. Something's off—they're making risky moves that don't match their usual careful approach."

My father and Mikhail start discussing logistics and timelines while Daniil sits silent, just nodding when they look at him. I tune them out and pull out my phone.

ME:
When are you done at work

My leg bounces while I wait for an answer I already know. Boundaries suck. The typing bubbles appear and disappear a few times before his response comes through.

ZAYCHIK:
Like an hour

ZAYCHIK:
I have a migraine and today has been awful

ME:
I'm coming to get you

ZAYCHIK:
No, you don't have to

ZAYCHIK:
It's okay… Really, I promise

ME:

It’s raining. I’ll be there

ZAYCHIK:

But my bike

ZAYCHIK:

I can’t leave it someone will steal it

I glance up at my father who’s still explaining something to Mikhail and Daniil. “Can I borrow your SUV?”

My father stops mid-sentence and gives me a curious look. “Fine.” He waves his hand dismissively and continues talking about police databases and access points.

ME:

It fits in the car

ZAYCHIK:

Are all Russians this stubborn or is it just you? Okay I’ll be waiting for you outside

He’s one to talk about stubborn.

ME:

One hour zaychik

I pocket my phone and tune back into the conversation just long enough to catch the tail end of Father’s instructions about surveillance schedule. Kelly’s having a bad day, which means I’m not wasting time on strategy meetings that can happen without me.

I’m about to stand up when someone knocks on the door and then opens it. All our heads snap that way. A guy gets shoved down to his knees, and a gun presses against his head. Three of our security guards stand behind him. My father’s main security officer steps forward and clears his throat.

“Apologies for the interruption, sir. Found this one outside, attempting to gain access to the club. Claimed he was meeting someone, but we caught him trying to reach the garage to photograph the vehicles. We searched him and found a camera and phone. What would you like us to do with him?”

My father’s expression doesn’t change. Without even glancing at the guy on the floor, his eyes cut to me. “Alexei. Handle it. Get everything out of him, then clean it up before you leave.”

Son of a bitch. I don’t have time for this. I wanted to be there early to pick him up. Instead, I’m stuck dealing with some idiot photographer.

I push up from the chair and walk over. He’s young, early twenties, haven’t seen him before. I grab him by the shoulders and haul him to his feet, then slam my fist into his face. His nose breaks with a crack, and blood sprays across his mouth. He tries to drop, but I don’t let him, grabbing him by the throat and squeezing until he chokes. Then I throw him back down, and he hits the floor hard, gasping for air.

I grab his hair and yank his head back. “Start talking. I’m already pissed off, and you’re making it worse. What were you doing here?”

He coughs, spits blood. “Someone hired me for intel, man, please. They said it would be quick, in and out.”

“Who paid you?”

“I owed someone drug money, and they said I could do this instead of paying. Please let me go, I didn’t know what this place was.”

My teeth grind. Fucking errand boy.

Mikhail clears his throat. “We need to find out who sent him. If it’s the Nozares trying to gather intel on our operations, that’s a problem. If it’s someone else, that’s a different problem. Either way, he’s seen our faces, this location, the setup.” He gestures at the guy bleeding on the floor. “He dies regardless. Question is whether we use him to send a message back or just make him disappear quietly.”

He’s right.

Mikhail’s smart when he’s not fucked up on benzos or coke or whatever combination he’s using this week. Strategic mind, sees three moves ahead when he bothers to focus. I’ve been watching the way my father treats him, and he’s harder on Mikhail than any of us, pushing him more and testing him constantly.

I think he’s grooming him to take over one day, seeing if he can handle the pressure and wants to know if Mikhail can lead when it matters. He just needs him sober enough to actually do it. That’s the part that keeps not happening.

My father’s gaze shifts to the guy on the floor, calculating. “Daniil will go through the phone and camera. Trace who contacted him, pull any messages, follow the digital trail.” His eyes move back to me. “Extract everything he knows. Then we make sure whoever hired him gets the message loud and clear.”

My nostrils flare, and my hand twitches at my side. I grab the guy by his throat and haul him up. He claws at my hands, choking, boots scraping against the floor as I drag him toward the door.

My temper's already hanging by a thread. Kelly's going to be waiting in the rain, and I'm stuck dealing with some errand boy who picked the wrong fucking day to take pictures of our cars.

I PULL UP TO THE CLINIC IN AN ESCALADE. KELLY'S STANDING OUT IN HIS navy scrubs with his arms wrapped around himself, talking to some other man who looks like he's in his thirties and standing way too close for my liking.

I narrow my eyes. Then I get out of the car.

Raindrops hit my face as I walk toward them. Kelly spots me, his eyes going wide.

The other guy turns around and looks me up and down. His gaze travels from my face to my shoes and back up like he's sizing me up. I already don't like him. If he's said something to Kelly that upset him, I'm going to need his full name.

I wrap my hand around Kelly's neck, pulling him into me. He lands with a soft sound against my chest. Zero self-control when it comes to him. None.

He glances up at me, then looks over at the man. "That's Brady. One of the other veterinarians working here."

I don't take my eyes off Brady. Still deciding if he gets to keep all his teeth.

Brady extends his hand with a friendly smile. "Hey, nice to meet you."

I don't take his hand. He frowns, dropping it awkwardly.

I grab Kelly's chin, tilt it up, and crush my mouth to his. He gasps, caught completely off guard. I shove my tongue in before my brain catches up, then pull back.

Stupid. I'm so fucking stupid.

I can't be seen in public with him, let alone kissing him in front of other people. I never think straight when he's involved.

"Sorry I'm late. Ready to go?" I ask, keeping my voice flat.

He gawks at me with wide green eyes, pink creeping up his neck, his mouth still parted and lips wet from my kiss.

Perfect.

“Your timing’s perfect actually. I would’ve forgotten the paperwork I need if you’d been on time. Camilla went to grab it.” he says. “Brady was just keeping me company.”

Keeping him company. Right.

My head snaps over to Brady who’s rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably. Good. He should be uncomfortable. I wonder if he’s a screamer or if he’d try to play tough. Would he bite his tongue, clench his jaw while I start cutting off his fingers one by one until he realizes this isn’t an interrogation—it’s entertainment. For me, anyway.

The clinic door opens. A woman with dark brown skin and braids twisted up in a bun steps out. I recognize her. The one Mikhail brought home from Ozero before ditching her when Daniil had a meltdown.

She stops when she sees me. Brady takes that as his cue to fuck off.

“See you tomorrow, Kelly. Have a good night.”

Dead fucking man walking.

I lift Kelly’s bike and load it into the back of the SUV carefully, making sure the frame doesn’t scrape against anything, then close the trunk and move to the passenger side.

I lean against the door with my arms crossed while they finish their conversation.

She says something, puts her hand on his shoulder, then glances over at me but keeps the conversation going. I can’t hear what she’s saying but whatever it is makes him rub the back of his neck and nod along nervously.

Eventually they both walk over. The look she gives me is full of suspicion, but she sticks out her hand anyway. “Hey, I’m Camilla. He told me you guys met at Ozero and are *friends*.”

“Alexei.” I shake her hand briefly.

Kelly shoots me this tight little smile. “She’s still kind of weirded out about that night. Some guy took her home and then ditched her.”

I keep my face completely blank. “Sounds unstable. Lucky he left when he did, probably a serial killer.”

Kelly coughs and elbows me into my stomach. “Um, or maybe just a weird person. Not necessarily a killer.”

“Oh my god, yeah.” She nods seriously. “He kind of did give off those vibes, now that I think about it.”

I bite back the smirk.

“So … Kelly has told me you work for your family? Some office thing?”

I shrug. “*Da*. Bookkeeping. Handle the accounts for my father.”

Kelly looks at me with that expression that says *play it cool*, so I add, “Spreadsheets all day. Very tedious.”

I watch her look over at Kelly and then at me with confusion. “You don’t really look like someone who would do that kind of work, but okay. I just want the best for Kelly. I’m protective when it comes to him, just so you know.”

“That’s good. He deserves people who look out for him.”

“Yes, he does. And will you? Take good care of him?”

I like her. I respect that she’s protective of him, the same way I am. Kelly needs people who care about him, who’ll call out anyone who doesn’t treat him right. Having someone like her in his corner, so he won’t be completely alone if something happens to me.

Kelly interrupts before I can answer. “I think we should probably go home now, it’s freezing.”

They start bickering about something pointless, and I excuse myself, walking back to the car to wait while they finish up.

KELLY LETS OUT A BREATH AS SOON AS WE STEP INTO HIS APARTMENT building. His ass bounces in those navy scrubs as he heads for the stairs, and I grab his shoulders, stopping him mid-step. I scoop him up before he can protest, one arm under his knees, the other supporting his back. He wraps his arms around my neck and grins at me.

I love carrying him. His smaller frame fits perfectly in my arms. He’s had a long day, and I want to make it better.

I set him down at the door just long enough to unlock it. The second we’re inside, I don’t give him time to settle. I shove him against the wall, fist his scrubs, and kiss him like I’m trying to burrow inside his chest.

My tongue pushes past his lips, greedy and desperate. His hair's damp and curling slightly from the rain. He's already flushed, so beautiful and completely mine.

I'm fucking starved for him. I drop to my knees, hands grabbing his hips. I need his cock in my mouth right fucking now.

He grabs my wrists. "Wait."

I freeze and glance at him. His lip's caught between his teeth.

"I'm going to take a shower," he says. "Then I want you to fuck me."

"*Da*," I breathe. "I'll make it good for you."

He has no idea what he does to me.

I keep telling him he's mine, but the truth is so much darker than that. He owns me—completely. Controls me like a dog on a leash, and I'd let him tighten it until I couldn't breathe. I would do anything for him. Anything he asked. Anything he needed. Things he'd never think to ask for because he doesn't understand what he has.

I've never been on my knees for anyone but him. Never wanted to be. Never will be again.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

I'm devoted to him, fully, whether he understands that or not.

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Chapter 17

Kelly

Alexei's sprawled out on the bed with jeans unbuckled and hand resting over his abs with no shirt on. My cock throbs. It's already hard, but this just makes it worse. He looks unreal, and he wants *me*.

He props himself up on his elbows and looks me over, starting at my feet and stopping at the towel at my waist before lifting his eyes to my face.

"I'm so hard right now knowing I get to be inside you, *zaychik*. Come here."

I nod so fast it's pathetic. My feet move before my brain catches up, and as soon as I reach the bed, he yanks the towel off and grabs my waist, dragging me on top of him.

I land on his chest with a gasp and crash my mouth to his. His stubble scratches my chin with each movement. We're already kissing messy and desperate with tongues pushing, sucking, swirling against each other. I grind against him, while his hands grab my ass and squeeze so hard I moan.

We don't stop until my lungs burn and I have to pull away to breathe. I blink, panting, lips tingling, heart racing.

The way he looks at me flips something in my stomach. Nothing about it is sweet. It's raw, starved, consuming—as if his control just snapped, and I'm about to find out what he's been holding back.

He grabs my shoulders and flips us, settling over me before taking my mouth. His lips trail down my jaw, then lower. He bites at my neck, pulling a gasp from me, then licks and sucks along my throat, spreading heat in his wake.

"I'll mark every inch of you so no one forgets who you belong to," he murmurs against my skin. He moves lower, licking down my chest, biting

at my nipple, then further down my stomach. My cock's already leaking so bad it's wetting my own chest. It's pathetic how much of a mess he's made me.

"Spread your legs. Let me see what's mine."

I open up for him. His hands slide under my cheeks, grip my waist. The first flick of his tongue against my hole makes me jolt.

I hold onto his hair tight, pushing him in deeper without thinking.

He pulls back for a second, breath hot. "Fuck, you taste so good." He's instantly back on me, tongue swirling, teasing, dragging in maddening motions that make my breath stutter.

He pushes his tongue inside me, slow at first. When a finger slides in with it, my head tips back, and I choke on another sound. My eyes squeeze shut. I tug harder on his hair, desperate for more.

I fumble with one hand, reach over toward the nightstand, grab the lube and condoms, and drop them next to us. He doesn't even pause.

"I want nothing between us when I'm inside you. You have no idea how long I've wanted this. I want my come dripping out of you, want you full of me."

I bite my lip. "I've been tested. I'm negative."

He nods. "Me too."

I trust him.

"Please."

He mutters something in Russian and shoves his jeans down just enough to free his cock. My mouth goes fucking dry. He's thick, already leaking, and then he wraps his hand around himself and strokes once. Next, he grabs the lube and slicks up his fingers.

He leans in, and his tongue drags down my stomach, all the way to my cock. His hand wraps around the base and lifts it while his tongue swipes over the tip, catching all the pre-cum. The sound I make is embarrassing, a desperate gasp that I can't swallow back.

Cold lube-slicked fingers press against my hole and push inside while his mouth closes around the head of my cock. My back arches off the bed, and I'm caught between the two sensations, pleasure radiating from both points until I can't think straight.

He works me open with one finger, curling and stroking while his tongue does filthy things to my cock. Every time he hollows his cheeks and sucks, I get closer to losing my mind. Then another finger joins the first,

and the stretch makes me hiss. Burns a little, but god, it feels good, especially when he scissors them and finds that spot inside me that makes everything go white.

“Stop teasing me,” I groan, barely coherent. “Please, Alexei, I need more.”

A third finger pushes in, and my mouth falls open.

He’s stretching me so wide, fingers twisting and spreading, hitting my prostate over and over until I’m shaking. His mouth never stops working my cock, tongue tracing every vein, and I’m going to come if he doesn’t stop.

“Please, I’m ready,” I breathe out. “Please, I need you inside me. I can’t, please—”

He pulls off my cock with a wet sound and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes are so dark they’re almost black, pupils blown wide, and he looks wrecked. Slowly, he pulls his fingers out, and I whimper at the loss, clenching around nothing.

He slicks up his cock, stroking himself once, twice, staring at me the whole time like he’s memorizing this moment.

He grabs my legs and pushes them up against my chest, folding me in half. The position makes me feel exposed as hell, and when he lines himself up and starts to push in, the stretch steals every thought from my head. My hole opens around him, taking him inch by inch, and it’s so much.

The stretch hits all at once as he presses deeper, slow but relentless, and when he bottoms out, the groan that tears from his chest is the hottest thing I’ve ever heard. Every inch of him is inside me, and I can’t breathe, can’t think, can only feel how full I am.

“Look at you,” he says, voice wrecked. “Ruined already, and I’ve barely even started.”

He leans down and kisses me hard and messy, then pulls back and slams into me. The first thrust punches the air from my lungs, and I moan so loud I slap a hand over my mouth, but it’s useless. He’s splitting me open, and it feels so fucking good I could die.

He grabs my hips, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise, and yanks me into each brutal thrust.

“Take your hand off your mouth. I want to hear every filthy sound you make while I’m buried inside of you.”

His angle shifts, and suddenly, he's hitting that spot deep inside me with every thrust, again and again, relentless and perfect. Pre-cum leaks out of me, trailing from my cock to my stomach in sticky strings, and I'm so close I can barely see straight.

Jesus Christ, he's actually going to make me come without even touching me.

"I'm going to, I can't, I'm—" The words dissolve into a broken moan because I can't form sentences anymore.

My balls pull tight, and then I shatter. My cock pulses and cum spurts out in thick ropes, striping up my stomach in messy lines. Every thrust drags another sound out of me, louder and more desperate than the last, until I'm practically sobbing with it.

"Fuck, look at you," he groans.

His grip on my hips tightens, and his cock swells inside me, rhythm stuttering into something erratic and desperate. He groans, deep and rough, and warmth floods my insides as he comes. He keeps fucking me through it, slower now but still deep, every thrust making me twitch from how sensitive I am.

He drops onto me, forehead pressed to mine, both of us gasping for air like we just ran a marathon.

"You're squeezing me so tight it feels like you're begging me never to pull out," he murmurs against my lips, and I can hear the smirk in his voice.

He kisses me again, slower this time, lazily exploring my mouth while our hearts pound against each other. I wrap my arms around his back and hold him there, our bodies sticky with cum and sweat, chest to chest, breathing each other's air. When he finally slides out of me, I actually pout at the loss.

"I think you might have fucked me so hard that I'm about to pass out," I mumble against his mouth.

He huffs a soft laugh. "We are going again in five minutes. That was just foreplay."

My eyes widen.

"You won't be able to leave even if you wanted to when I'm done with you. I'll make sure your body remembers me every time you try to move."

"You're insane," I say, breathless.

"*Da*."

I narrow my eyes at him. “You can’t just fuck someone so hard they can’t go to work the next morning, Alexei.”

He eyes me like I just challenged him to prove exactly how wrong I am. I already know I screwed up by saying that.

“Watch me,” he says, voice low and dangerous. I can feel him getting hard again against my thigh.

“Wait, that’s not what I meant,” I try to amend, but he’s already looking at me with that predatory hunger.

He kisses me once, hard and possessive, then starts moving down my body. His mouth finds my neck, my chest, drags lower and lower until he’s between my legs again. I’m still sensitive, still trembling from the first round, and when he spreads me open with his hands, I gasp.

“Alexei, what are you—Oh fuck.”

His tongue drags across my hole, and I jolt, oversensitive and shocked. He’s licking his own cum out of me, groaning like it’s the best thing he’s ever tasted, and the obscenity of it makes my spent cock twitch with interest.

“That feels amazing,” I breathe, hands fisting in the sheets.

He doesn’t stop. His tongue pushes inside, licking deeper, tasting himself mixed with me, and the filthy wet sounds fill the room. It’s too much and not enough at the same time. My body doesn’t know if it wants to pull away or push closer.

“I can’t, I just came, I—”

He pulls back just enough to speak, voice rough. “You can. And you will.”

Then his mouth is on me again, tongue fucking into me while his hands grip my thighs and hold me open. The sensation is overwhelming, the slide of his tongue against oversensitive nerves making me shake. I’m getting hard again, and I shouldn’t be, it’s too soon, but he’s relentless.

“Christ—”

He hums against me, and the vibration makes me cry out. His tongue works deeper, licking and sucking, cleaning his cum out of me like he’s starving for it. One hand slides up to wrap around my hardening cock, and I nearly come apart right there.

“That’s it, *zaychik*,” he murmurs against my skin. “Get hard for me again. I’m not done with you yet.”

And god help me, my body obeys. I'm fully hard again, aching and desperate, while his tongue continues its filthy assault.

He pulls back, chin slick, eyes dark with hunger. "Ready for round two?"

I nod frantically, beyond words.

He slicks himself up again and lines up at my entrance. I'm already open, already wet from his tongue and the mess we made, and when he pushes in this time, it's easier. Still a stretch, still overwhelming, but my body takes him readily.

"Fuck, you're still so tight," he groans, bottoming out in one smooth thrust.

This time there's no slow build-up. He sets a brutal pace immediately, fucking into me hard and deep, exactly like he promised. Each thrust punches sounds out of me, desperate and loud, and I don't even try to muffle them this time.

"That's it," he says, voice thick. "Let me hear you. Let everyone know who's fucking you senseless."

His angle is perfect, hitting my prostate with every stroke, and I'm already close again. My body is overstimulated, trembling, caught between too much and not enough.

"Touch yourself," he commands.

I wrap my hand around myself and stroke in time with his thrusts. It only takes a few pulls before I'm there, gasping his name as I come for the second time, painting my stomach with weaker spurts.

He fucks me through it, chasing his own release, and when he comes again, he buries himself deep and groans my name.

We collapse together, both wrecked and gasping.

My alarm goes off, and I groan. I reach for my phone, miss it, and it clatters to the floor, still ringing. He shifts behind me, arms tightening around my waist.

"Make it shut up."

"You need to let go of me then," I say, barely opening my eyes.

He groans and releases me so I can roll over and reach for my phone to turn off the alarm, then crawl back into his warmth. My ass is aching after last night because he kept his promise and fucked me so hard I genuinely don't think I can go to work today. His arms wrap around me again, his heat making my eyes want to close.

I eventually force myself off the bed. My skin prickles. I glance out the window at a dark, cold fall morning and already dread the day ahead.

"It's a busy day at the office for me. I need to print a lot of papers." He wipes his hands over his face while saying it, making his abs and biceps flex distractingly.

Is printing papers another way of saying killing people? Or is he just saying that without the double meaning? I don't know what is wrong with me. I keep letting myself forget what he actually does for a living.

"Please don't print a lot of papers today. Can't you just sit at the computer all day or something?"

He drops his hands and looks over at me with a frown. "No. I have a huge list of names I need to print, and my father wants it done today."

"Nope, stop. Lalalala." I cover my ears and walk toward the bathroom.

He follows me with his arms crossed, watching me brush my teeth.

"It bothers you."

I scoff and pull the toothbrush out. "What, your office job? Yes, it bothers me."

I shove the toothbrush back in and keep brushing aggressively.

"I was born into this."

I sigh and spit into the sink. "I know, but that doesn't make me feel any better about knowing what you do. I hate we can't even be seen in public together. I was so confused when you basically claimed me in front of my colleague because you're the one who said we can't do things like that."

He rubs at his jaw. "This is what I do, Kelly. I kill people. I'm good at it, and I'm not stopping." He steps closer. "I'll tell you I'm printing papers and filing reports, but we both know what I'm really doing. We can pretend all you want." He takes another step closer. "And about yesterday? My family has rules about everything. Who I can want. Who I can touch. I've broken every single one for you. You're the exception to all of it."

"You're giving up everything, and I'm terrified I won't be worth it." My voice breaks despite trying to keep it steady.

He takes two fast steps toward me. I flinch and jump back on instinct. Not because I think he'll hurt me—I know he won't—but because my body learned this response a long time ago. David drilled it into me, and I hate that it's still there.

He stops short, frowning. "You're scared of me?"

I sigh. "No."

"Kelly."

"Just hug me," I say, wrapping my arms around him first, pulling him against me. His hands hesitate at my back for a moment, then he locks his arms around me.

"Did something happen to you?" he whispers into my hair.

The shame hits hard and fast, cuts right through my chest. I can't go there. I don't want to tell him, don't even want to say it out loud because then it's real again, and I've worked so hard to shove it down.

I feel pathetic for letting it happen even though I know I shouldn't, know it wasn't my fault. But that doesn't stop the voice in my head that sounds exactly like David telling me I asked for it. That I'm weak. That normal people don't let themselves get treated like that.

If I tell Alexei what really happened, he's going to see it too. He's going to realize I'm the type of person who gets walked on and keeps coming back. He's going to figure out that I'm already broken, and maybe that's not what he wants.

I hate feeling this small, weak, and pathetic.

I don't want him to look at me like I'm some damaged thing he has to be careful with. I don't want him to know that part of me still thinks maybe I had it coming.

"No. I'm just tired."

He pulls me in tighter, his voice still low but firmer now. "You don't have to tell me what happened. Give me a name, and I'll take care of the rest."

I freeze for a second.

I shake my head and look at him. "It's not like that. Nothing happened, okay?"

I hear him breathe out slowly and nod into my hair before he grips me tighter and kisses the top of my head.

We're both so fucked up by the people who were supposed to teach us how to be loved. He grew up thinking this was shameful, dangerous,

something to hide. His whole family probably thinks the same way. But he keeps choosing me anyway, keeps coming back, keeps letting himself want this even when it scares him.

Whereas I’m too scared to tell him what David did because he taught me I deserved it. That I asked for it by staying. That normal people don’t let themselves get broken like that.

Maybe we’re both just learning how to stop being ashamed of the parts of ourselves other people convinced us were wrong.

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Chapter 18

Alexei

I scratch the side of my head with the tip of the gun, then drop my hand and click my tongue. “Just tell me the name of the retired detective, and I’ll kill you quick. I’ve got other plans today.”

Three men sit slumped in the chairs with arms yanked behind their backs and ankles duct-taped to the legs. I’ve worked them over good for the past hour. I’m bored now.

I know something’s wrong with Kelly. Something happened to him, and he won’t tell me.

I still catch him flinching, still see him shrink when he thinks he’s in trouble. He doesn’t trust me with it. That hurts more than getting shot did. But I’ll wait. However long he needs. Even if it kills me.

These Nozares rats in front of me just happen to be on my father’s list so I’m multitasking.

“We don’t know anything,” one of them blurts.

“We don’t have names for you. All we know is someone’s been giving up locations, tipping off raids before they happen.”

I sigh and roll my neck to work out the tension. “See, why didn’t you say that an hour ago? You could’ve kept your fingers, maybe even a toe or two.”

“Please,” another one begs, voice hoarse from screaming.

“We told you everything.”

I open my mouth to answer, but stop when my phone buzzes. I check the screen and see Kelly’s name.

I push myself up slowly and look down at them. “Here’s how this is going to go. I’m going to answer this phone. You’re going to stay silent. If I

hear anything, I swear to God I will make your death a fucking art piece. You understand?"

One of them lets out a pathetic whimper, so I raise my eyebrows at him. His mouth snaps shut, and he stares at the floor.

I drop into the chair, lean back, and rest the gun on my thigh, then put the phone to my ear.

"*Zaychik*."

He clears his throat. "I hope this isn't a bad time. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Did something happen?"

"No. Just a terrible day, and my boss isn't helping."

"What's his name?"

One of the men shifts in his chair. I lift the gun slightly without looking away from his face. He freezes.

"Nice try. I know exactly what you're doing, and I'm not telling you."

He could list every person who's ever annoyed him. I'd handle every single one of them without blinking. But fine.

"How was your day at the office?" he asks, trying to change the subject.

"Productive. Had those client meetings we discussed."

Then it starts. One of the bastards in front of me starts whimpering again, this wet little cry like he forgot where he is and what's about to happen to him.

I sigh and shoot him in the head. The sound echoes through the room. Blood spatters across my boots and onto the two still breathing. I glance down at the mess, then raise my eyebrows at the survivors like go ahead, fucking try me. They both look down immediately, silent.

"Jesus Christ. What was that?" Kelly asks. "Was that a gunshot?"

"*Nyet*, someone at the office got mad at the printer and kicked it."

"Are you okay? Did you get hurt?"

"I'm fine. But the person got fired."

"I regret calling. I'm just … whatever. I wanted to ask if maybe we could go out later or something, like on an actual date."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, still holding the gun. We can't do that again. It's too risky. I was stupid for doing it that one time.

"You know we can't."

"Never mind. Just ignore it," he mutters, his voice going cold and defensive.

“*Zaychik*. Please.”

“No, it’s fine. I know the rules, and I’m sorry I brought it up. I’ll see you later.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, hating how this conversation is ending.

He hangs up.

I drop the phone and press the barrel of the gun to my forehead. Close my eyes. One of the men lets out a wet, shaking breath and starts sobbing again. Begging. I don’t bother listening to what he’s saying.

I was seven years old the first time Father handed me a knife.

The man was already tied to the chair, already bleeding from somewhere I couldn’t see. Father stood behind me, close enough I could smell the cigarette smoke on his coat, and told me exactly where to cut. How deep to go. What would happen if I fucked it up.

I didn’t fuck it up.

Blood went everywhere. My hands, my clothes, spreading across the concrete in pools I had to step around. I stood there after, watching it drip off my fingers, waiting for something to hit. Guilt, fear, disgust, anything.

Nothing came.

Father clapped me on the shoulder when it was over. Told me I did good. Said most kids my age would’ve cried or thrown up or run screaming.

I asked where to clean the knife.

That’s when I got it. This was what I was built for. Not school or friends or whatever normal kids did. This. Blood and silence and doing what needed to be done without hesitation.

I’ve lost count since then. The number’s in the hundreds, maybe higher. They all blur together after a while. Faces I don’t remember, names I never bothered learning, bodies that had to disappear one way or another.

I don’t feel mercy for any of them. Not then, not now, not ever.

My brothers think I’m broken. That Father sharpened me into a weapon and pointed me at whoever needed killing. They’re not wrong. But they don’t understand that I was always this. That seven-year-old kid standing in someone else’s blood wasn’t traumatized. He finally understood what he was for.

Most people are born with something that makes them hesitate before they hurt someone. I don’t have that. Never did. Father didn’t destroy it. There was nothing there to destroy. I don’t feel guilty about the killing.

Don’t lose sleep over the screaming. Don’t give a single fuck about these two bleeding out in front of me right now.

But Kelly? He looks at me and somehow sees past all of it. The blood, the bodies, the cold thing my family carved me into. He knows what I am. Knows exactly what I do in rooms like this. And he stays anyway.

He looks at me like I’m something worth keeping. Like I matter beyond what I can kill.

I don’t understand it. Can’t wrap my head around why he’d want someone like me. But whatever he cracked open inside my chest won’t close again. This desperate, aching thing that makes it hard to breathe sometimes. Makes me want things I don’t have words for.

I open my eyes and lean back in the chair, looking at both men. Really bad day to be you two. Because now I’m even more pissed off than I was before Kelly called, and you’re both about to pay for his disappointment and my inability to give him the one normal thing he asked for.

He sounded so fucking sad on the phone. Just wanted something simple. Something easy. And I had to say no because god forbid Roman finds out his son likes men instead of women.

Kelly shouldn’t have to pay for my family’s bullshit. But he’s paying for it anyway.

And so are these two. I took him to that café already. That was reckless enough.

But when he asks me for something, I just … give in. Every single time. He’s making me break rules I’ve followed my entire life.

If my father finds out I’m with a man, Kelly becomes a problem, and I know how he solves problems because I’m the one who does the solving. But this time I’ll refuse the order. And if he tries to force me, I’ll put a bullet in his head. Kelly’s mine to protect, even from my own blood.

FUCK IT. I’M ABOUT TO DO THE STUPIDEST THING I’VE EVER DONE. GOOD thing I’ve lost my mind.

He wants a real date? I’ll give him one that’ll ruin him for everyone else. He owns me, has me wrapped around his finger and doesn’t even realize it.

I pull out my key and shove it into the lock.

The door swings open to Kelly's apartment—technically mine too now since we've spent every second together and I'm not going anywhere. He can kick, scream, change the locks, and none of it would matter because he belongs to me.

I walk straight to the bedroom. He's curled up in bed with his laptop open, some random show playing. Clover's knocked out beside him. His hand rests on her soft brown fur. He looks up.

"Get dressed."

"What?"

"We're going on a date."

He scrunches his nose. "No, it's fine. I'm sorry I asked. I was having a bad day, and it was a stupid impulse. I wasn't thinking clearly. I know we can't really do that kind of thing since it's risky. We can just order food here and watch something."

"I made reservations."

My ancestors are probably rolling in their graves. If any of my grandfathers could see me now, they'd shoot me in the head themselves.

"Are you sure?"

"*Da*."

I settle beside him, lying back and pulling Clover onto my chest. Her fur is impossibly soft, her body warm and trusting against me. I always thought rabbits were pointless pets, but she's actually perfect. Just like everything else Kelly touches.

"Do I need to dress nice?"

"Dress however you want. You look sexy in everything."

He scoffs and mutters something under his breath and starts pulling out clothes. I watch him strip off his shirt, watch him change his mind, and pull on something else. I can't stop staring at every movement he makes.

The drive to the restaurant is quiet. Kelly fidgets with the radio, settles on some pop station I couldn't care less about. Then sings along to a Tate McRae song. I knew his playlist was full of pop songs, but actually hearing him sing it is something else entirely.

By the time I park, I'm already tense because I know exactly how I want the night to end.

He doesn't know that yet. He just asked for a date and has no idea what he's walking into.

He’s wearing black jeans and a white shirt with the top buttons undone, his hair styled wavier than usual, messier but deliberately so. My mouth goes dry the second I look at him. He’s gorgeous and all mine.

I still can’t wrap my head around why he doesn’t run. He’s too good for a man like me. Too kind, too pure for someone with blood under his fingernails. But I’m selfish enough to keep him anyway.

“Ready?”

He glances out the window at the upscale building and nods. I move around to open his door. He lets me take his hand. We walk toward the back entrance. I type the code into the keypad, and the door clicks open. Dropping his hand when we step inside.

He looks around, probably wondering why we’re not going through the front like normal customers.

Gloria’s the first to see us. She’s wearing a red dress tonight, skin-tight, with blonde hair falling past her waist. She works under Yulian but answers to all of us when needed.

She’s beautiful despite being scarred all over her face and body. Even with her missing ear and fingers. It doesn’t take away from her appeal. If anything, it adds to it. She survived something terrible.

Yulian pulled her out of whatever hell she was in years ago, gave her a job and purpose. He has a habit of picking up damaged people and making them useful.

“The room’s ready,” she says, eyes flicking curiously to Kelly. “Menus are on the table, servers are waiting for your signal.”

She gives me a small smile. I don’t return it. I don’t like the way her gaze lingers on him with obvious interest.

We follow her down the hallway. She opens a heavy door and shuts it behind us. The private room has dark green walls with low lighting from the ceiling. One wall is covered entirely with mirrors, the other draped with heavy curtains hiding nothing but concrete. Yulian’s always been a dramatic asshole. Everything has to look like a stage set. In the center, there’s a table set for two with black chairs and a single candle flickering between us. I pull out his chair. He sits, and I push him in, then move to the other side and drop into my seat.

He studies the room, taking in every detail.

“What is this place?”

“A restaurant.” Among other things, which I’m definitely not telling him about.

He nods and glances down at the menu. “I can’t afford this. These prices are insane.”

“Don’t think about that. It’s on me, *zaychik*.”

He chews on his lip and keeps scanning the menu.

I’ve eaten here more times than I can count and know exactly what I want. Besides, my dessert is sitting across from me. I plan to devour him later.

A waiter approaches our table and nods respectfully. “Ready to order?”

“I’ll have the special and a bottle of vodka.”

Kelly snorts, then clears his throat. “I’ll have the roasted chicken with herbed potatoes and garlic cream sauce. And wine, not the bottle, just a glass.”

He looks over at me while holding back a smile. He’s so pleased with himself for that one. The corner of my mouth pulls up before I can stop it.

The waiter nods and disappears, returning a minute later with our drinks before leaving us alone.

I tap my fingers against the table. “Not what you thought a first date would be like?”

“This is nice. I’ve had such a terrible day, you have no idea. I wanna quit and find another place to work.” He rubs his temple, then takes a sip of his wine.

“What’s so bad about it?”

He snorts. “My boss is such a cheap bastard. He refuses to upgrade anything; half the machines break down every other week. And now he wants to cut staff because apparently we can’t afford proper equipment or enough people, but somehow there’s money in the budget for his personal espresso machine.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Two thousand dollars,” he adds. “And it’s only for him. Has his name engraved on it and everything. The rest of us aren’t even allowed to look at it.”

I listen while he continues talking about inventory problems, scheduling issues, then something about Camilla. His hands move more when he gets worked up. I let him ramble. I like the sound of his voice. Even if I’m only catching half the details, the rhythm of it settles something in my chest.

His boss is already on my growing list.

I wonder how he'd react if I started rambling about my day. I got one step closer to finding that retired detective, which is progress. I still have to work through more names. It's eliminate, interrogate, disappear, repeat. It's boring work; I'd rather be here.

The food finally arrives. Kelly takes his first bite, then closes his eyes. I stare at his mouth a little too long.

I pop the cap off the vodka and drink straight from the bottle.

"You're not even going to pour it into a glass?"

I stop mid-drink and shake my head, then take another sip and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Can I try it?"

"Sure." I lean across the table and hand him the bottle. He sniffs it first, his nose wrinkling, then brings it to his mouth and takes a small sip.

He coughs immediately with his hand flying up to cover his mouth as he wheezes out, "Christ. That's strong. What the hell is that made of?"

"It's the best you can get from Russia." I shrug and take the bottle back for another sip.

He's still blinking hard like it physically hurt him. I enjoy his reaction more than I should. One day, he will appreciate vodka.

"Are you done with the food?"

He nods.

"Good. Because I want my fucking dessert now."

I push back from the table, walking around to his side. He's already watching me with eyes that flick down, then up again like he doesn't trust what I'm about to do.

I reach for his chin with my thumb, brushing slowly underneath it, then drag my fingers up to his ear and slide them around the back of his neck.

Then I drop to my knees.

I shift his chair to pull him closer. His hands land on my shoulders immediately. "Wait. You mean here?" His voice is tight, breathless. "What if someone walks in? The servers … don't they usually check in or ask how the food was?"

"They won't."

"How do you know that?"

"If they open that door, I'll put a bullet in them without pulling out of you. Let them watch me fuck you while they bleed out."

His fingers tighten on my shoulders. He’s trying not to react to my words, but I feel the way his thighs tense under my hands. He’s torn between fear and arousal, and both responses make me want to devour him right here on this chair.

I unbuckle him and drag his pants down, press my palm to his stomach, and push him back into the chair. He leans back, eyes wide, cock already half-hard and twitching. I take him into my mouth before he’s even fully hard and feel him swell against my tongue.

My tongue drags down the underside, swirls around the tip, slow and wet, before I take him deeper. His moans start low and tight, growing louder when I pick up pace, hollowing my cheeks. I work him down until his hips jerk, and he twists his hands into my hair.

I reach down and dig into my pocket, pop off him for a second to rip open a packet of lube with my teeth. Squirt it into my hand, throw the wrapper somewhere on the floor, and take him back into my mouth like I’m starved.

Slick fingers trail down, past his balls, along his taint until I reach his hole. I circle, slow, teasing, then push one finger in. “That’s so good.” His voice shakes as he grips my hair tighter.

I groan, loving the way he clenches. I work him open, second finger sliding in, then third, taking my time stretching him with soft thrusts until he’s panting. My mouth never stops, tongue working him while my fingers fuck him open.

When I’ve had enough, I stand up and drag my fingers out slow, watch the way his thighs tremble. His cock’s flushed and leaking, stomach tensing with every breath.

I push my pants down enough to pull out my cock and slick the head with leftover lube still coating my fingers. The things on the table are in my way, so I grab the edge and tilt it up, letting everything slide off in one loud crash. Plates, glasses, the candle, all of it shatter against the floor. I set the table back down flat and empty.

“What are you doing?” he blurts, half-laughing, half-horrified.

“Come here.”

He swallows hard and mumbles something about insane Russians.

I grab him gently by the throat. Walk him backward until he hits the table. Slide my hand around to the back of his neck and crush our mouths together, tongue sliding into his, swallowing the sound he makes.

It’s messy and perfect. I don’t stop until I can’t breathe.

I lift him up onto the edge of the table, guide his hips toward me, then line myself up and look at him.

He meets my eyes and nods, jaw tight, already bracing. I start pushing in. My head drops forward, breath stuttering. He grabs the edge of the table, body tensing, a soft moan slipping out.

“Shhh. I’ve got you.”

I pull out and grab another lube from my pants, rip it, and pour more onto my length.

I position myself and push in, slow at first. He’s looser now, easier, but still so tight it makes my whole body jerk. I glance down and watch my dick stretching him open, disappearing into him inch by inch. “Fuck, look at you,” I say roughly. “Opening up for me.”

He gasps when I bottom out.

I stay there a moment to let him adjust. Thighs trembling, eyes wide and glassy, mouth open. When he nods, I draw out and sink back in harder. Grip his knee to hold him open while I start to move faster, working him open with every thrust. “You think I’ll ever let anyone else have you?” My voice is rough, breath catching. “*Ty moy*.” You are mine.

He tries to speak, but nothing comes out except messy little gasps and curses, hands flying up to cover his mouth. I don’t let him. I grab his wrist and pull it away, shake my head while I keep fucking him. “Let me hear you.”

Each thrust hits deeper, the sound obscene. I can’t hold back. Can’t even think. Every squeeze around me drags me closer to the edge. When I glance down and see his cock twitching against his stomach, I almost lose it.

“Feels so good,” he gasps.

I grab him and start jerking him, fast and tight. He barely lasts. He seizes and spills across his stomach and my hand. I smear it with my thumb, then bring it to my mouth, licking it clean while I stare into his eyes.

That’s what finally does it. I slam into him harder, chasing the heat, everything coiling tight in my gut. My cock swells, and I come inside of him with a deep groan, thrusting hard until I’m empty.

The second I pull out, I drop to my knees between his legs and hook his thighs over my shoulders, opening him up completely. I was raised to finish my meals, and I don’t give a fuck that his legs are shaking or that his cock is oversensitive and twitching.

I press my mouth to his cum-soaked hole, tongue sliding inside. The taste of myself mixed with him makes me groan against his skin. His whole body trembles as I lick deeper, chasing every drop.

“Alexei—oh fuck.”

My hand finds his cock, still half-hard and slick. He hisses when I wrap my fingers around him, but I don’t stop. I work him with firm strokes while my mouth stays busy between his cheeks, catching every sound, every reaction.

He shudders, swears, begs. I feel him clench around my tongue as I alternate between licking up my mess and fucking him with my tongue. His cock hardens in my grip, and I know he’s close again. A soft gasp, then he’s coming hard, hot jets shooting over my hand and his stomach while he shakes apart above me.

I hold out my hand to help him up. He’s shaking slightly, so I pull him against me and wrap my arms around him, running my hand up and down his back.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry,” I mutter into his hair, breathing in that coconut-lime scent like it’s oxygen. “If it was too much, you can tell me.”

“No. It was perfect.” He lets out an exhausted little laugh. “I’m completely wrecked. Thanks for basically ruining every other date we’re ever going to go on.”

“Good.” I press my mouth to the side of his head. “Glad you liked it, *zaychik*.”

He wipes at his eyes quickly.

I grab his chin, tilting his face toward me. “Did I hurt you?”

His eyes are red and wet, not crying exactly, but full, like whatever he’s been holding inside finally cracked and there’s no space left to hide it. It hits me harder than it should, right in the heart, worse than any bullet I’ve ever taken. It makes something go cold and hollow inside me, seeing him like this and knowing I might have caused it, even if he says I didn’t.

“I’m fine,” he whispers. “Sorry.”

That word again.

“What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

He shakes his head and folds himself against me with his arms around my waist, his face against my shirt like he’s trying to disappear completely.

“It’s nothing,” he mumbles into the fabric. “You’re perfect, okay?”

No. It’s definitely not nothing.

Something is very wrong.

Every instinct I have is screaming that he’s lying about what happened, especially about how he got those injuries. The tickets and fines they’ve been hitting him with make no sense now that I know him. When I followed him to work, I watched him pick up trash on his way and throw it away properly. Who does that in New York where the streets are covered in garbage? Kelly does, which means he’s not the kind of person who racks up violations.

This is driving me fucking insane.

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Chapter 19

Kelly

I'm barely holding it together for the last half hour of my shift. Lying to Alexei about what's wrong feels terrible, but what was I supposed to say? The seasonal depression is kicking my ass, and this morning I found more fines in my mailbox.

Paying them means David wins, right? Not that I have the money. I gave everything to my father before I finally cut him off. But even if I could pay, it would feel like handing David exactly what he wants …

My mom always said I was too stubborn to ask anyone for help, and she was right. Now I'm drowning, and I miss her desperately.

I shove on my shoes from my locker and grab my coat, heading for the back door.

"Are you leaving without saying goodbye?"

I roll my eyes. "I literally gave you a hug an hour ago, Camilla."

"I know, but you've been so busy lately and barely had time for me." She coughs into her hand. "Busy with dick."

"Shut up." I glance around instinctively because I told her no one can know about Alexei. I didn't say who he actually was or anything, just that he's very private. She asked way too many questions about the accent, the tattoos, why he looks like he walked straight out of a prison yard. She's not buying the bookkeeping bullshit.

"Is he good to you though? That's all I really care about."

I nod.

"Oh my god … that smile on your face right now."

"Stop, you idiot." I shove her shoulder playfully.

“You free tonight? I could throw your bike in my car, and we could grab something to eat, chill at my place?”

I think it over. I really miss spending time with her. “Please, yes. And let’s get wine.”

“I’m still not over that buzz cut guy from the club. He was so hot, Kelly. You should’ve seen his blue eyes and all those tattoos. And …” She pauses, frowning. “He also had a Russian accent now that I think about it.”

It all clicks into place.

Ozero is owned by Alexei’s family, and he probably used one of his brothers to distract Camilla while he took me upstairs to interrogate me. Just tossed a hot Russian man at her like a grenade and hoped she’d be distracted enough.

“You know what, Alexei was probably right. You should stay away from that guy because he’s probably a serial killer,” I say with the fakest smile I can manage.

She narrows her eyes.

“Come on, let’s go get drunk.” I grab her arm and pull her into a tight hug, needing the comfort of my best friend right now.

I pull out my phone to let Alexei know I won’t be home until later.

ME:

Going to dinner with Camilla tonight, probably won’t be home until late

ALEXEI:

Fine. Working late anyway. Lots of filing to catch up on.

ME:

Please don’t work too hard at your very normal office job

ALEXEI:

Funny.

ME:

I’m being serious. Don’t file too many documents.

ALEXEI:

I’ll try to restrain myself.

ME:

Thank you… And be safe please. I’ll text you when I’m heading home

ALEXEI:

Have fun zaychik.

I slip my phone back into my pocket, wondering how he didn't tell me not to go. Didn't get angry or possessive. Just told me to have fun.

My ex would've lost his mind over this. Would've guilt-tripped me into canceling, shown up at the restaurant to "check on me," made having friends feel like a betrayal.

Alexei just let me go. Wants me out with Camilla. Wants me happy.

I don't know what to do with that. This terrifying man who breaks into my apartment and kills people for a living is giving me more freedom than the cop I dated for two years.

That shouldn't make sense. But here we are.

I GIVE CAMILLA A LAST HUG BEFORE WALKING OUT OF HER APARTMENT. I called an Uber so I don't have to walk home. Camilla's keeping my bike for me since there's no way I'm biking home with this wine buzz. I'd probably fall over and then Alexei would take my bike and hide it like I'm a child who can't be trusted with wheels.

"See you. Go have fun with your hot Russian," she says, kissing my chin.

"Have a good weekend."

She smiles and closes the door while I head for the elevator. It's pitch-black outside with that cold, bone-deep November darkness that makes everything feel hostile. I just want to crawl into bed with my boyfriend.

Wait. We never actually said what we are, but I think we're together? He basically lives at my apartment when he's not working, and we don't really leave much.

I push the door open and the cold air hits like a slap. Glancing around, I groan when I see my Uber's running late. I pull out my phone to check the app. This city and the constant traffic jams.

A car pulls up in front of me.

That's not the car I booked.

I take a step back, then another.

The driver door opens, and a man steps out.

“Hello, Kelly. Get in the car.”

The buzz evaporates instantly, replaced by ice-cold terror. My hands shake, and I can feel my breathing getting shallow because this is exactly how it always started with him, the calm voice right before everything exploded.

“How did you find me, David?” My voice is smaller—that automatic response to make myself less threatening, less likely to set him off. “If you come near me, I swear to god, I’ll scream.”

He snorts. “Always so dramatic.” He takes a step forward, then another—unsteady. I back up fast, trying to pivot toward the door before he reaches me.

I don’t make it to the door before he grabs my wrists and spins me around, pressing me against the cold metal. His grip is too tight, fingers digging into bone.

“I just want to talk,” he says, voice deceptively calm. “Stop being difficult and listen to me.”

His breath hits my face, hot and wet and sour with whiskey. I gag. The alcohol fumes twist my stomach. I have to breathe through my mouth to keep from throwing up.

When he drank, everything got worse—his moods, his unpredictability, the things he’d say.

“Okay.” I slip into that voice, the one I always used when I had to make it stop. “Okay. If you let me go, I’ll listen.”

He hesitates, studying my face. “You promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

His grip loosens slightly, and I turn around to face him. His face is flushed with bloodshot eyes and pupils so huge they’ve swallowed most of the blue. He’s high on something that makes his jaw twitch and his mouth stay slack. I don’t know how he even drove here without killing someone.

“I miss you, Kelly.” His voice cracks, then slurs. “I want you back. I need you.”

I would rather die. The thought hits me like a punch. I’d actually die than go back to this life. Back to walking on eggshells, back to making myself smaller, back to being afraid of every sound in the night.

“You know I can’t do that, David.”

His face twists into something ugly. “You left without giving me a chance to fix things.”

“You can’t fix this. You hurt me too many times.”

“Hurt you? I loved you! I gave you everything and you threw it all away.”

I try to step sideways, but he blocks me with his arm. “David, please. Just go home.”

“You’re mine. You don’t get to just walk away from me.”

“There is no us anymore.”

He grabs my shoulders and pushes me back against the door. “Nobody else is going to want you. You’re too much work, too broken. But I love you anyway. You need me. You’ve always needed me. You’re going to get in that car with me right now.”

“No.” The word slips out before I can stop it. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

His face goes completely blank for a second, then twists with rage. “What did you say?”

“I said no.” My voice is shaking, but I force myself to meet his eyes. “I’m not getting in that car.”

“You don’t get to tell me no!” He grabs me by the shirt and yanks me up, then throws me down hard.

I hit the concrete, my head cracking against the pavement. Everything goes white, then black around the edges. Pain explodes through my skull and radiates down my neck.

“Look what you made me do! I didn’t want to hurt you, but you never fucking listen!”

My vision swims. The world tilts sideways, and I can’t focus on anything.

Is this it? Is this where it finally goes too far? All those nights I lay awake wondering if this moment would come, if he’d snap completely because I finally left him. I always thought I’d fight harder, that I’d be braver when it mattered. But I’m just lying here like a broken thing, just like always.

Alexei was teaching me how to feel safe again, how to believe someone could actually protect me instead of hurt me. I wish he was here right now. He’d make David pay for every single thing he’s done. But he can’t be everywhere, can’t shield me from everything, even though I know he’d try.

“I gave you everything. A home, love, protection. And you threw it all away.”

I try to say something, but the words won’t come. Everything feels distant and muffled.

A whimper escapes my throat. I hate that sound. Hate how small it makes me feel. Tears blur my vision as the old fear claws its way up my chest.

Voices blur around me, getting closer.

“Hey! What are you doing!”

Fast footsteps, David cursing, then tires screeching as he speeds off into the night.

Someone drops beside me with a hand hovering near my face.

“You all right, man? I saw what he did. I called an ambulance, okay? Just hold on.”

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Chapter 20

Alexei

Kelly never came home last night.

Not at midnight. Not at two. Not at four. He's still not here.

I pace his tiny living room, rubbing my hands through my hair with my chest tight and my head completely fucked. I've looked everywhere for him. I broke into Camilla's building around six in the morning. Found her passed out on her couch, alone, empty wine bottles everywhere. Kelly's jacket was there, so he'd definitely been there, but he was gone.

If Kelly left her place and never made it home, someone grabbed him. He never even sent the text saying he was heading home like he promised.

I even drove by his clinic. There was some other guy working the night shift who might not ever be coming back to work again. He didn't have the answers I needed.

Something's wrong and I can feel it, this slow sick burn in my chest that won't go away.

I knew I shouldn't have taken him out to that restaurant. I fucking knew it.

I did it anyway. I wanted it, wanted him to feel normal for five minutes. And now someone saw us and they took him from me.

I called Mikhail and Daniil out of pure desperation, told them to meet me here. I trust them because they wouldn't care about this the way our father would. They'd keep it secret and help me fix it.

A knock on the door and I'm already moving, yanking it open.

"About time. Get in here," I snap.

They glance at each other, then walk inside. Daniil's carrying his laptop bag. Both of them look around the tiny space.

Mikhail clears his throat. “Whose place is this? What happened?”

I wipe both hands over my face, trying to calm down but failing completely.

“It’s my boyfriend’s place.”

Both of them open their mouths, then close them, then just stare at me like I grew a second head.

“Very funny. Now whose place is this really?” Mikhail repeats.

I clench my jaw and start pacing again.

Daniil tucks on Mikhail’s sleeve and shakes his head.

“Do you know something I don’t, Danya?” Mikhail asks.

I stop mid-step and look at Daniil. He’s already watching me with that expression that says he’s figured something out. There’s something bordering on apology in his eyes.

Of course he put it together. I’ve basically been using him like a personal data stalker since I met Kelly.

“You have a boyfriend?” Mikhail asks, his voice sharp with disbelief. “You’re …” He clears his throat. “What the fuck.”

I point my finger at him. “If you say anything I don’t like, I swear to God, I—”

He interrupts me, “Fuck. Relax. Just processing this. I mean, I’ve never seen you with anyone ever, so I figured no one liked you because you’re the biggest asshole on the planet besides Yulian.”

I click my tongue and lunge for him, grabbing a fistful of his shirt. “Are you two going to help me or not?”

Mikhail rolls his eyes. “Only if you let go of my shirt before I drop you, motherfucker. And is that a rabbit over there?”

I shove him back, breathing hard.

“Yes, that’s a fucking rabbit, and no you can’t pet her, bitch.” I point a finger at him.

“Can you please just explain what’s happening because I’m confused as hell. I just learned my brother has a boyfriend. Are you insane, by the way? Do you remember what happened to our mother’s brother?”

“Don’t mention him,” I snap. “I need help. He didn’t come home last night and something’s wrong. I’ve been calling him and there’s nothing. I think someone might’ve taken him.”

I turn to Daniil, desperate. “Can you do your thing and find something online? I can’t think straight.”

Nodding, he walks over to the corner and sits on the floor, opening his laptop immediately.

“Wait, how does Danya know you have a boyfriend? How does he even know his name? Can someone explain this to me?”

“He figured it out on his own because I’ve been asking him for help trying to make sense of this situation. Something is happening to Kelly, someone is hurting him, and he’s protecting them. It’s driving me fucking insane,” I say, pointing at the side of my temple.

“His name is Kelly? Isn’t that a girl’s name?”

“I’m going to stab you in the neck, then enjoy watching you die.”

He lifts his hands up in the air. “Fuck, will you calm down? Hats off to Kelly for putting up with your cranky, murder-happy ass, you drama queen.”

I open my mouth to snap back, but Daniil carries his laptop over, setting it in front of us. He taps the screen where it shows Brookvale Medical Center.

My body kicks into overdrive, and I bolt to the door, running down the stairs before my brain catches up.

“Wait,” Mikhail shouts behind me.

I hear them scrambling after me, their footsteps heavy on the stairs, but I’m already two flights down and moving faster than I’ve ever moved in my life.

I COULDN’T THINK THE ENTIRE RIDE HERE BECAUSE MY HEAD WAS completely useless. My stomach hasn’t stopped turning since I found out where he is. I’m going to be sick.

Daniil couldn’t find any details, nothing about what happened, no condition update and no police report. So now I’m bracing for the absolute worst.

I’m out of the car before Mikhail even parks it and sprint across the parking lot. Heading straight for the sliding doors of the hospital. Everyone in the lobby turns to look at me, but I don’t give a fuck. I walk past the line of people waiting to the front desk and slap my hand on the counter.

“Kelly Francis Mackey. What room?”

The woman—probably in her mid-fifties—looks up at me slowly. “There’s a line, sir. You can’t just cut in front of everyone. And only family can visit patients. Are you family?”

“*Da*, I’m his family. And if you don’t tell me right fucking now, lady, I—”

I move my hand toward my pocket.

“Alexei,” Mikhail says sharply, grabbing my wrist and yanking it back before I can pull the knife. “He’s just exhausted. It’s been a long night. Could you please just give us the room number so we can get him out of here before this becomes a bigger scene?”

She sighs, glares at both of us, then types something into her computer. She gives us a room number and points down the hallway.

I’m already running before she finishes talking.

I reach the door and yank it open, and my vision goes red.

Kelly’s in the bed, his head wrapped in white bandages soaked through just enough to show red bleeding into the gauze. I go straight to his bedside and grab his hand. It’s warm. He’s breathing, but completely unconscious. I lift my other hand and touch his chin, careful and gentle.

“Kelly.”

Nothing. He’s completely out cold.

I’m going to find whoever put their hands on him, and I’m going to destroy them. Not kill them. Destroy them. Break every finger, every rib. Make them watch while I work. They’ll beg me to end it, and I won’t—not for hours, not until they understand that touching him was the last mistake they’ll ever make.

“Hey, you can’t be in here.”

A nurse appears in the doorway, glancing between the three of us.

“We’re his family,” Mikhail says.

She scoffs. “Yeah, sure. Now get out before I call security.”

I let go of Kelly’s hand and move toward her, and she flinches.

Mikhail steps in front of me and throws out his arm to block my path. “Miss, can you just tell us what happened before he goes full murder-suicide and this whole thing becomes a mess?”

“I can’t tell you anything. It’s confidential. And if you don’t leave right now, I’m calling security.”

I open my mouth, about to tell her exactly where she can shove her fucking policy.

“Stop,” Kelly croaks.

I whip my head around.

The nurse steps forward. “Do you know these men?”

“Yes, I know them,” Kelly mumbles. “Don’t call anyone.”

She sighs and walks out, closing the door.

I turn to Mikhail and Daniil. “Get out. I need to talk to him alone. Wait in the lobby.”

Mikhail rolls his eyes and rubs his head. “Fine. Come on, Danya.” He grabs Daniil by the shoulders and steers him toward the door.

The door shuts, and I turn back to Kelly.

“Tell me what happened. Right now. I am not doing this thing again when you say you are fine and nothing is wrong. I can’t take this anymore.”

A tear slips down his cheek, and he wipes it away.

“I’m sorry, Alexei.”

His voice cracks; and that sound punches straight through my chest.

I sit on the edge of the bed and wrap my arms around him carefully, avoiding the bandage, and kiss his cheek gently.

“Don’t say sorry. You do not have anything to be sorry for. Just tell me what happened.”

He nods, arms locking around me like he is scared I will pull away.

“Please don’t be mad at me. I … I …” He stops. “My head hurts so bad.”

I tighten my hold around him, careful of not hurting him.

“I have a concussion. They kept me overnight for observation. They took my phone and said I’m not allowed to look at screens yet. I don’t have your number memorized, so I couldn’t call you. I tried calling Camilla, but she didn’t answer.”

My heart splits open. He was here all night. Alone. Scared. In pain, without me to protect him.

I kiss his chin. It is wet from his tears, and I taste salt.

“I need you to promise me something,” he whispers.

I close my eyes and breathe out slowly. Nod.

“I don’t want you to kill anyone for me. And if you do, I don’t want to know about it.”

I nod again and kiss his forehead.

Whoever hurt him is already dead. Has been since the moment I suspected someone was harming him. Physically. He just does not want to

carry the weight of knowing.

He breathes out shakily. “Okay, I …” He clears his throat. “My ex. He used to beat me.”

Then he tells me everything.

All the things that piece of shit did to him. Bottles thrown at him. Hitting him. Controlling who he could see, isolating him from friends. Breaking his arm. The harassment that followed when Kelly finally left. The restraining order that got dropped because his ex knew the judge.

Because his ex is a cop.

His partner helped him. Targeted Kelly together. Gave him so many parking tickets Kelly had to sell his car. Filed false reports. Harassment claims. Made his life hell for months.

I clench my fists. Feel my rage building in my chest like fire. Every word Kelly says makes it worse.

I am going to tear those motherfuckers apart.

“They ran me off the road. Drove their squad car at me when I was biking home. Then yesterday, he showed up at Camilla’s building.” His chin shakes. “I’m sorry, Alexei. I didn’t want to tell you. I was ashamed. I thought you’d think less of me. I lied about everything. I didn’t want you to see me like this. I didn’t want to be weak. But I am.”

I grab his shoulders. Just firm enough that he has to look directly at me.

“Kelly, you are not weak. Every mark he left on you is proof you survived him. Every scar is evidence of your strength, not his power. You think you’re broken? You’re not. You chose to keep going when it would have been easier to give up. That’s not weakness—that’s fucking heroic.”

His eyes stay locked on mine, wet and exhausted and completely wrecked.

“The one who did this to you? He is the weak one. Not you. Never you.”

A broken sob rips from his chest, then another. He can’t stop. Months of holding himself together, months of pretending he’s fine, and it all comes pouring out.

“I am so fucking sorry I missed this.”

“It’s not your fault,” he mumbles against my chest between sobs. “I kept it from you.”

“Please don’t think you are weak. You are not, *zaychik*. I would never think less of you. I hope you know that.” I pause, feeling my throat tighten.

“In my eyes, you are the strongest person I know. And I hope you know I would never lay my hands on you. Ever.”

He nods against me, small and quiet. We sit like that for a while. I hold him tight and try not to fall apart.

I can’t believe I missed this.

And he is a cop. Which makes everything infinitely worse.

My father works with the police. We have a deal with the commissioner. No touching cops unless we get permission from him. And even then, it is a process that takes time.

I can’t bring this to him. He will kill Kelly for being the problem that started it.

And I can’t live with that.

“Kelly, you can’t go to work for a while, alright? So can we stay at my place while you recover? I can’t let you be alone in that apartment.”

“But—”

“No. You need time off, and my house is the safest place you can be right now. We’ll have to sneak you past security, but after that, you can stay as long as you want.”

He sighs and rubs at his temple with a wince. “Can I bring Clover?”

I scoff. “I wasn’t going to just leave her. Who do you think I am?”

He shakes his head and gives me a tired little smile. “I think you’re the best boyfriend.”

The way he looks at me when he says that makes something tighten in my throat.

Fuck. I almost lost him. The thought keeps circling, digging deeper every time. I almost lost him before I could show him exactly what he meant to me, before I could make him understand that he’s mine and nothing will change that.

This demands patience and planning. I can’t just track his ex down and slowly peel the skin from his bones, much as the image satisfies. Kelly needs to be safe first. Protected. Then I can deal with the trash.

My eyes dart toward the door to make sure the nurse isn’t watching. She looked at me like I was some sort of fucking dangerous animal earlier. If she tries to separate us or says one more thing about security, then visiting violations are going to be the last thing she ever worries about because I will throw her out of the fucking window. We’re on the fourth floor. Plenty high enough.

I kick off my shoes and carefully crawl into the hospital bed with him. He shifts to make room, and I push my face into the crook of his neck and breathe him in. That coconut-lime scent I've memorized, mixed with sterile hospital chemicals. My arm wraps around him, and I pull him closer, needing to feel his heartbeat against my chest.

I would never look at him differently for what he went through. The fact that he was scared I might blame him makes something violent twist inside of me. It makes me want to find his ex tonight and start the real fun.

He needs to know he can make his own choices without me controlling everything. I'm glad he went to dinner with his friend. He should be able to see people, live normally, feel secure and free.

Even though every instinct I have is screaming to hide him somewhere safe where nothing can touch him. Keep him protected from everyone except me. The urge gets worse every day. Just grab him and never let him leave. This constant war with my own nature around him is fucking me up, forcing me to choose between what I want and what's right. So I hold him carefully instead, memorizing the weight of him against me.

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Chapter 21

Kelly

My head won't stop pounding from where it hit the pavement.

I'm sitting in Alexei's car, trying not to throw up, and I'm so embarrassed he had to come get me from the hospital.

I let things go too far, let my pride get the best of me. I didn't reach out for help, and I could've died because of it. I should have known better by now. Should have learned from the first time that trying to handle things on my own just makes everything worse. Maybe if I hadn't been so stubborn, so determined to prove I could take care of myself, none of this would have happened. Maybe if I'd just swallowed my pride and asked for help instead of thinking I could deal with David on my own, I wouldn't be sitting here with my head split open again.

David was right about one thing—I am pathetic. Can't even protect myself from one drunk asshole with daddy issues. What kind of man does that make me?

I keep making the same stupid mistakes. Keep thinking I'm stronger than I actually am, that I can handle more than I can. It's like I never learn.

I'm starting to think there's something fundamentally wrong with me that I keep ending up in these situations. Normal people don't repeatedly put themselves in danger like this. Normal people know when to ask for help before things get this bad.

Alexei probably thinks I'm stupid … And he would be right.

I glance over at him, then down at our tangled hands resting between the car's armrest. His thumb brushes against mine, and I close my eyes again. The brightness streaming through the windows is making my head scream.

We've been driving for almost an hour in Alexei's Escalade.

A sudden movement makes me flinch. I open my eyes just as Mikhail leans forward from the backseat and punches his brother in the shoulder.

"Yellow car."

"You motherfucker," Alexei snaps. "Did our mother drop you on your head as a baby? That actually hurt. Fuck you. And stop yelling, you're going to make Kelly's headache worse."

"It's two to nothing now," Mikhail says proudly.

"Yeah, because you and Daniil are the only idiots playing this stupid game. Beat on each other, not me," Alexei mutters, rubbing his shoulder before sighing.

A smile tugs at my lips. Now I get what he meant when he said they drive each other crazy.

His brothers seem surprisingly okay with me being here. They left to pack up my things and get Clover while Alexei stayed with me, and now here we are.

Apparently, they live on the same land, not in the same house but close enough. There's space between them, but still. It makes me nervous. I don't know how big the property actually is, but it sounds like some family compound situation.

Mikhail's the one I recognized from the club that night. Makes sense now that it was a setup. The gene pool in this family is borderline insane. He's twenty-four, just as tall as Alexei but with slightly bulkier muscle and way fewer tattoos. Ridiculously hot with a buzz cut, dark eyebrows, and piercing blue eyes. I get why Camilla's been losing her mind over him. He seems more open personality-wise too, talks constantly, doesn't know how to be quiet.

Daniil's different. He's adopted, which makes sense now that I think about it. He's beautiful in a softer way. Delicate features, about an inch shorter than me, none of that intimidating bulk. Black hair sticking out messily from his hoodie. Hazel eyes. Nose ring.

Alexei slows the car down. I glance out of the window as we turn onto what looks like a dirt road. Trees everywhere. The pavement gives way to crunching gravel, and then he stops.

A little further ahead, a massive black gate with guards carrying guns standing outside. There's a huge golden wolf in the middle of the gate,

curled and heavy-looking, with a skeleton key in its mouth. I've seen that symbol before on Alexei's ring and Daniil and Mikhail's necklaces.

"Put this over you for the cameras."

He gives me a blanket, helping pull it over my head and shoulders.

The car moves forward again, then stops. Everything's still throbbing, so I lean on my other senses. Metal grinds somewhere close, something heavy opening, and then he drives through.

He removes the blanket, and I lift my head and look out of the window.

The land is massive with endless trees. We're back on smooth asphalt now with fields stretching out on both sides. We drive past one enormous mansion, then another, both with their own gates.

Is this like a mafia suburb?

We keep going, then turn left down another tree-lined road. Then a full-blown mansion comes into view. Modern architecture with floor-to-ceiling glass windows, and wood panels mixed with white stone. Huge, tinted windows wrap around the entire structure.

This is where he lives? And he's been staying at my tiny shoebox apartment this whole time? Sleeping in my bed with the uneven frame and broken heater, listening to street noise all night?

He stops the car and both his brothers jump out immediately. Alexei comes around to my side and opens the door, putting his hand out. I take it and get out, still feeling lightheaded and just stare.

This place must have cost millions to build.

I watch Mikhail try to grab Clover's cage, but Alexei hip-checks him out of the way and takes it himself without a word. Mikhail flips him off in response.

I follow them to the front door where Alexei types something into a keypad. The doors open with an electronic click, and he pushes them open, walking inside.

I stand there for a second.

The interior is all open layout with expensive wood floors and cream-colored walls. Everything smells clean and warm. Cozy in a way I didn't expect from the exterior.

I glance toward the wall by a mirror near the entrance and notice a long crack running through the drywall.

"I bet you're wondering what happened there," Mikhail says. "Your asshole boyfriend had a tantrum and punched the wall. Right next to my

head.”

He walks off, flipping Alexei off again. I blink and turn toward my *boyfriend*, who mutters something in Russian, hands me Clover’s cage, and immediately takes off after his brother.

I hear them yelling down the hall, doors slamming, then Mikhail yelling something back in rapid Russian.

I glance over at Daniil, who’s still standing near the entrance. He sighs and shakes his head like this is completely normal.

“Is it always like this?” I ask.

He nods and strolls into the house. I follow him with Clover’s cage.

There’s a sunken living room with massive black sectional couches arranged around a low glass table.

I don’t have words for this place.

The kitchen flows seamlessly into the living space. Beige marble covers the island counter, the kind that cascades down the sides like a waterfall.

On the floor, Alexei has Mikhail in a headlock—arms locked tight, their legs tangled.

Mikhail then shifts his weight, grabs Alexei, and slams him into the floor with a hard thud, twisting him into an armlock that looks painful.

Alexei yells and taps out frantically on his brother’s arm. Mikhail laughs and releases him immediately. They both stand, brushing themselves off like nothing happened. Alexei slaps the back of Mikhail’s head.

“They’re going to leave now,” Alexei tells me. “Say bye to Kelly.”

Mikhail walks past me. “Bye, Kelly. Feel better.”

Daniil trails after him without a word. He leans in and says something too quiet for me to hear, and Mikhail laughs in response.

I don’t think Daniil likes me, or maybe he just doesn’t talk to people much. He only ever seems to speak to Mikhail. Weird.

“Can I crawl into your bed now? My head hurts so bad,” I say.

“Yeah. Follow me.”

The entire left side is floor-to-ceiling glass, looking out over a covered pool and open fields that stretch into the distance.

He leads me into his bedroom. The same wall of glass faces the fields, making the space feel wide and exposed at the same time. A huge bed sits at the center, dark covers pulled tight, matching nightstands on either side. An en suite bathroom opens off to the right.

The room is warm. Comfortable. It smells like him.

Alexei walks over and kisses the top of my head.

“Get some rest. I’ll set up Clover’s space and let you sleep.”

I nod and hand him the cage. He takes it without a word and walks out of the room.

I strip down slowly, every movement making my head throb harder, then crawl under the covers and sink into the mattress. It’s soft but firm. I place my hand over my eyes to block out what little light filters through the windows, and sleep drags me down before I can think about anything else.

WARMTH PRESSED AGAINST MY BACK AND ARMS WRAPPED AROUND MY waist—that’s how I wake up. I sigh and close my eyes again, letting myself sink into it, into him. The heat of his chest, the slow rise and fall of his breathing against my neck.

My head still hurts, throbbing behind my eyes like something’s trying to claw its way out. The hospital gave me pain medication and told me to watch for certain symptoms. If it gets worse, I’m supposed to go back immediately.

Lips press against the back of my neck. Then his arms tighten around me.

“Morning,” he mutters, voice groggy. His accent’s heavier.

“Thank you for everything,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I lied to you.”

“You do not need to apologize, *zaychik*. I got you.”

I lean into him. Another kiss lands against the back of my neck, soft and careful.

There’s a low sounding noise from somewhere near the floor. I open one eye to see Clover sniffing around the edge of an expensive-looking rug.

“We need to bunny-proof this house,” I mumble. “Get rid of loose cables and anything she might chew.”

“No,” he says instantly. “She is a good rabbit. She will not chew anything.”

I squint at him through my headache. “She’s an animal. She’s going to chew through every cable and probably destroy something expensive.”

He looks at me with mild offense. “Do not speak like that when she can hear you.”

Then he flops down on the pillow.

I stare at him for a second. I think he's getting genuinely attached to her, which is weirdly sweet and also mildly terrifying. She absolutely will destroy his things, and he's about to find that out the hard way.

His breath hitting the back of my neck soothes me, and I close my eyes, finally letting myself relax. The second I do, I'm back on the ground, concrete slamming into the back of my head. Something thick lodges in my throat, and I try to swallow, but it won't go down.

Panic starts clawing through me, and I can't breathe. My heart pounds so hard it hurts, hammering against my ribs. The taste of copper fills my mouth from where I've bitten down on my tongue, and my hands start shaking uncontrollably. I try to make them stop, but they just shake harder, trembling against my will.

Alexei notices, and I feel him loosen his grip on me, pushing himself up to look at me.

I'm not okay. I'm really not okay.

All these months of being in constant fear finally crash down on me. It hits me like a freight train, and I can't control the full-body panic and sobbing that tears out of me. My chest heaves as I struggle to breathe, everything around me feeling both overwhelming and strangely numb. I'm so tired. So tired of being scared all the time.

"I'm here. Tell me what you need."

His voice cuts through the mess in my head, but I can't answer him. The words are trapped somewhere between my lungs and my mouth. Instead, I turn around and bury my face into the crook of his neck, breathing in that familiar scent and letting his solid warmth steady me. His arms tighten around me, and his lips press against my temple.

"Breathe with me," he murmurs against my hair, his voice low and steady. "In. Out. Just like that."

I try to follow his rhythm, my sobs slowly turning into shaky, uneven gasps. His hand moves in slow, comforting circles on my back, and something in me cracks open. Relief mixing with grief.

"No one will ever hurt you again. I will make sure of it."

The rational part of my brain knows that's impossible. He can't control the whole world.

"I'm not going anywhere, Kelly."

My breathing evens out, the panic slowly retreating like a wave withdrawing from shore. Instead of pulling away, I cling to him desperately, arms wrapped around him like he's the only thing keeping me from drowning. He's become my anchor without me even realizing it, the only thing that makes sense in a world that's been trying to destroy me slowly but surely.

"Better?" he asks after a few minutes, his thumb gently brushing over my cheekbone.

I nod against his neck, still not trusting my voice to work. Still afraid I'll start crying again if I try.

"Good." He presses another kiss to my temple, gentler this time. "Do you want to eat something?"

My breath catches, and I shake my head against him. He hums in response, the sound vibrating through me. His breathing evens out beneath me and exhaustion hits all at once. The panic attack drained everything out of me, leaving me hollow and wrung out.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"For what?"

"For not letting me fall apart alone."

For holding me together when I couldn't do it myself.

For making me feel less alone.

His arms tighten around me. "You don't have to go through any of this alone anymore."

My eyes drift closed, and I let sleep pull me under again, knowing he'll be there when I wake up.

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Chapter 22

Kelly

The past week has been a blur of sleep and headaches, most of it spent in Alexei's bed. Today is the first time I've actually felt better, but it's still been rough.

Gary's been texting me nonstop about when I'm coming back to work, but that's the least of my problems now.

I push myself up from the bed and immediately regret it when the room tilts sideways. I brace against the mattress, wait for my vision to stop swimming. Still recovering from the concussion. I make my way to the living room, one hand trailing along the wall for balance, but I don't see or hear anything. The entire house is eerily silent.

This place is incredible. But there are no photos of him or anyone on the walls. Nothing personal anywhere. It's more like he hired a designer to fill the space and never bothered making it his own.

My hand stays against the wall as I move deeper into the house, past what looks like a full home gym. I thought I heard him earlier, but maybe he left after I fell back asleep.

A metallic click echoes from the end of the hallway, toward the garage. I haven't been in there yet. I head that direction, ease the door open, and blink.

Three cars sit in the corner, including his Aston Martin Valiant, and there's room for at least five more cars. The garage is massive. Low Russian rap fills the space.

Alexei's at a workbench against the far wall, shirtless in gray jeans, turning around with a disassembled gun in his hands. He's cleaning it with a cloth. Then I actually look at the wall behind him. Rifles. Sniper rifles.

Handguns. Things I don’t even have names for. All mounted. All organized. An entire arsenal just hanging there.

He raises an eyebrow at me, keeps wiping down the gun. “*Da*, I know. Impressive.”

I rub the back of my head, wincing when my fingers brush the bruise, and walk farther into the garage. Then I see Clover darting out from under one of the cars and I actually laugh. “You brought Clover in here while you’re cleaning guns?”

He shrugs and tosses the cloth onto the bench, then does something to the gun that makes it click back together. “Rabbits need open spaces to explore. Nothing dangerous in here.”

I scoff and glance at the wall again, then back at him. “Yeah. Nothing dangerous at all.”

He sets the gun down on the bench and crosses over to me, pulling me against his bare chest. He kisses the top of my head, and I wrap my arms around him, breathing him in.

His hands rub up and down my back, slow and grounding. “How are you feeling? Hungry?”

“I’m a bit better today. What happens next?”

His hands go still on my back. Something shifts in his expression. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“I’m so tired of feeling broken all the time.”

He hums low and pulls me tighter against him. “*Zaychik*.”

I pull back just enough to meet his eyes. “Yeah?”

“Please believe me when I say I would never hurt you. You’re the only thing in this world that makes me feel human. The only thing I want to protect instead of destroy. I’d cut off my own hands before I’d let them touch you wrong. I will take care of everything for you.”

The words catch in my throat. I swallow, nod, feel my eyes start to burn. I bury my face against his chest before he can see me fall apart. His grip shifts, and I’m about to protest when his hands slide under my thighs and behind my back. He lifts me in one smooth motion. I wrap my arms around his neck and let him carry me, let myself sink into the feeling of being held.

“I’m running us a bath. I bought bubble bath for you.”

He did what?

“How did you even know I love bubble baths?” I press my lips to his chest.

“I went through your laptop when we first met. All your apartment searches had tubs. And I saw you at the store once, staring at bubble bath for three minutes before walking away without it.”

I pull back and just look at him. He raises his eyebrows, completely deadpan, zero awareness of how unhinged that sounds. I burst out laughing. “That’s … Jesus Christ.” I clear my throat. “Thank you.”

He carries me into the bathroom and sets me down carefully. I watch him turn on the water, add soap until bubbles start foaming up. Then he’s unbuckling his belt, shoving his jeans down, and I can’t look away. He’s half-hard already and my pulse kicks up.

He crosses back to me, and his hands are gentle when he helps me out of my clothes, fingertips dragging over skin. He takes my hand and pulls me toward the tub as it fills. He gets in first, then reaches for me, helping me settle between his legs. His arms wrap around me, and he’s careful not to touch the back of my head where it’s still tender. I sink back against him, let the heat of the water and his body seep into my sore muscles. My head still aches but this helps. Being here with him helps.

“Alexei?”

“Hm?”

I hesitate but go for it. “Will you teach me how to use a gun?”

He goes still behind me. “What?”

“I want to learn how to protect myself. I’m tired of being helpless.”

His arms tighten around me. “Why?”

“Because I’ve spent my whole life running from things. Making myself smaller, hoping that would keep me safe, but it doesn’t work.”

“You are safe with me.”

“I know. But you can’t be everywhere at once. What if something happens when you’re not there?” My voice cracks slightly. “I don’t want to be that scared person anymore.”

He’s quiet for a long moment.

“Good,” he says finally, and there something like pride in his voice. “You should know how to protect yourself.”

“Really?”

“After you heal.” He presses a kiss into my hair. “You are stronger than you think, *zaychik*. Time to learn to use that strength.”

“You’d be okay with me having a gun?”

“More than okay. This makes me proud, not worried.”

There’s something intoxicating about the thought of not being a victim anymore. I want to feel that confidence, that strength that comes from knowing you’re not an easy target.

I close my eyes and just breathe.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I FINALLY DRAG MYSELF TO THE COUCH, FEELING WEAK, but better than I have all week. Alexei walks in wearing only black workout shorts, chest bare and covered in sweat. His hair damp and clinging to his forehead. The guy works out so much, and I have no idea how someone can wake up at five thirty every morning to torture themselves with exercise. He’s been using his home gym every day since we got here. I might have wanted to murder him the first time that alarm went off so early, but now I’ve gotten used to it and sleep through it.

His phone’s been buzzing constantly all day. He opens the freezer, pulls out a bottle of vodka, takes a sip and puts it back.

I scoff. He glances over his shoulder, catches me looking, and smirks at me.

He’s been weird, like weirder than usual, keeps ordering things online for Clover with express delivery. Every day it’s a new package with food, toys, treats she’ll probably ignore. He even bought me clothes, like full outfits with shoes and jackets, everything I could possibly need.

He walks off toward his bathroom. I hear the shower start a minute later.

I stare at the ceiling and try not to overthink everything. He hasn’t really touched me since the hospital, not like that, and I know why. I know he’s trying to be careful with me, but I hate it. I don’t want to be treated like I’m made of glass.

Yes, what happened with David sucked. Yes, I was scared. But I’m still me, and I still want him.

I must’ve dozed off, because the next thing I feel is something soft in my hair, fingers moving gently through the strands. I blink open my eyes and see Alexei sitting next to me, shirtless with damp hair, holding my phone in his hands. His thumb moves across the screen, deleting something, before he notices I’m awake.

He glances down at me. “Sleep well?”

I sit up slowly and watch his hand fall from my hair. I catch a glimpse of him setting my phone back on the coffee table. When he looks at me now, there's something pained in his expression.

"What were you doing with my phone?" I ask, still groggy.

"Spam call. I declined it."

Something about his tone feels off, but I nod.

I know he's trying to protect me, trying to give me space after everything with David, but it's making me feel worse. I need to know he still wants me. That David didn't ruin this. That I'm not broken in his eyes now.

My body's still sore, and my head feels foggy, but I want this, want him. I press my palm against his thigh and slide my hand higher until I'm cupping him through his shorts. I pause and look up at him.

His eyes darken as he looks at me. "You don't have to."

"I want to," I say quietly.

His jaw tightens, and I can see the conflict in his expression, the way he's holding himself back.

"What happened with David doesn't change how I feel about you."

He reaches up and cups my face gently. "I just don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I'm better now, I need you."

He leans back a little and spreads his legs more, and I feel him growing under my hand, my cock twitches at the sight of it. I climb onto his lap without saying anything, straddle him, and the second my weight sinks down, his hands are on my hips dragging me into him.

Our mouths crash together, and he kisses me like he's starved, tongue already pushing into my mouth, messy and rough and so good I can't help the sound I make when I grind against him.

I kiss down his neck, teeth dragging against his skin, and when I suck hard near his collarbone and feel him flinch, I do it again. I want everyone to know he's taken. If anyone sees the edge of his shirt shift, sees his collar pulled down, they'll know someone's been on him.

I pull back just long enough to see dark red against the ink on his neck, and then he's grabbing my face and kissing me again, groaning into my mouth when I grind down harder, rubbing against each other through too much fabric.

"Let me taste you," I whisper, breathless.

His eyes are black when he pulls back, pupils blown, chest rising fast. He drags his thumb over my mouth slow and then presses it in. I suck on it, moaning around it, watching his face while he watches mine.

"I want to fuck your mouth," he mutters, voice wrecked. "You're making me so fucking hard, *zaychik*."

Nodding, I give his thumb a final deep swirl with my mouth, then I bring my lips to his neck and start kissing down to his chest as I slide off his lap to the floor, knees hitting the rug. He lifts his hips when I reach for his waistband, and I yank his pants and boxers down fast, my breath catching when his cock drops free and leaking already.

I tug my own sweats down with one hand, stroke myself once just to take the edge off.

"C'mon," he says, breath ragged. "Let me fuck that mouth."

I lean in and lick the head, tongue slow and heavy, then close my lips around him and feel the sharp jolt of his hips. Salty taste of pre-cum floods my mouth, making me desperate for more.

His hand grips my shoulder as I take more of him in, slow at first, letting my jaw adjust while I stroke myself with my other hand, chasing friction. He groans when I slide deeper, and when he lifts his hips again, I feel the head hit the back of my throat. I breathe through my nose and keep going, eyes fluttering half-shut.

His hand tightens on my shoulders as he starts to move, shallow thrusts that get sharper every time.

"Fuck," he grits out, voice shaking. "*Da*. That's it. Take it. Look at you."

I moan around him, louder this time, spit already running down my chin. He's fucking into my throat, making it hard to breathe right, but I don't want to stop. My throat's raw already and my eyes wet. I just want him to lose it.

His phone starts ringing. He sighs like he's about to murder someone. "*Blyat.*"

Seriously?

I pop off his cock and glare up at him. "Don't you dare answer that."

He looks down at me, breathless, cock thick and slick against his stomach. "I'm going to answer it, and you're going to keep me in your mouth while I do. And I want you to come all over yourself while I fuck your throat."

My stomach flips. That shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does.

His hand slips from my hair just long enough to yank the phone out of his pocket. He checks the screen, then lifts a finger to his lips.

“This better be important, Calder. Do you have the intel I asked for?”

His accent is thicker than usual. He never talks like this on the phone around me. I don’t know if he’s doing it because he trusts me now or if he’s just stopped caring.

His hand slides into my hair, and I take him into my mouth again, hot and heavy on my tongue. I swallow the pre-cum and gag a little when he pushes deeper. He doesn’t let me stop.

“Good. Send everything to Mikhail.”

I moan around him and reach down, stroke myself with my free hand, my hips already moving. His fingers tighten in my hair. He starts moving his hips. Not fast, but deep. I hear the hitch in his breath even if he’s trying to play it cool.

“I’m busy. We are going to take care of it soon.”

He shoves deeper into my mouth again.

“*Nyet*. I want to handle everything myself. Just have Mikhail prep everything.”

His voice wavers just enough that I know he’s close.

“It’s personal.”

I jerk myself harder, breath choking. I’m right on the edge, and he’s still holding my head down, thrusting his cock into my throat. My whole body tightens, and I come hard into my hand, gasping, my chest heaving as I try to keep going.

He groans from somewhere deep in his chest, and I feel his cock jerk once, twice, and then I’m swallowing heat. Salty, thick, all of it down my throat while I’m still trying to catch my breath.

He exhales slowly, presses the phone to his chin with eyes shut.

“We need to get his partner first. Then we handle the main target. I’ll text you later.”

He hangs up without waiting for a reply, then his hands come down and grab me by the arms, pulling me straight into his lap. He wraps both arms around me like he’s trying to fold me into his body.

“New rule. When you take a call like that, you have to speak Russian,” I mutter with a frown. “Because I don’t need to hear things like that. At least

you sound hot when you speak Russian, and I don't understand anything besides *blyat*."

"Fine. But Calder does not speak Russian."

Who is this Calder person? Actually, I don't even want to know.

"Fine," I shoot back, then stand and stretch. The room tilts slightly. I hear him move before I even lose my balance, his arms catching me like he knew it was coming.

"You okay? We should get you back to bed."

My head's throbbing, and maybe this wasn't the best idea. I need to rest more and I know it.

"Can you help me to bed?"

He doesn't even give me time to think before he lifts me straight into his arms. I blink, wrap my hands around his neck, and look up at him.

"Can you always carry me around the house like this?" I mumble into his shoulder while he walks us to the bedroom.

"If you suck my dick every day, sure."

I laugh against his neck. "Of course that's your condition."

He hums and walks us into the bedroom, careful not to bump the doorway. Then sets me down on my side of the bed so gently it makes my chest ache. He crawls over me a second later and lands with a thump, then wraps himself around me.

I'm in love with him. Not thinking about it, not questioning it anymore. Just am.

How does this work when he can't be seen with me? When his father's rules mean we have to hide? When loving me could get him killed?

We can't do normal couple things. Can't introduce each other to friends or go out without looking over our shoulders. And there's always the chance he won't come home one day. That whatever job he's on, whatever person he's dealing with, will be the one that takes him from me.

But I'm done pretending I want out. Done acting like the guns bother me or the secrecy is too much. I knew what he was when I saved his life. I know what he is now. And I want him anyway. All of him. Even the parts that should scare me off. Especially those parts.

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Chapter 23

Alexei

I've spent the last two weeks taking care of Kelly while he's been struggling with his concussion. It hit harder than the doctors said it would, leaving him emotional and irritable, sleeping too much. I called the doctors multiple times, and they keep saying it's normal, that it takes time.

He got irritated with me this morning, told me to get out of the house because I was hovering. Works for me. Gives me time to handle the problems he doesn't know about.

David sent a threatening text to Kelly while he was sleeping on the couch. I deleted it before he saw it, but this fucking piece of shit needs to die. I've been patient enough. This ends now.

Then there's Gary, who won't stop harassing him about returning to work, calling every day like Kelly's faking a brain injury for vacation time. The stress is slowing his recovery when he should be resting. Time to eliminate both problems.

I walk toward his house. Three stories of typical suburban bullshit. No security system visible and no cameras. Sloppy work that makes this easier for me.

I move around the side and hop the fence into the backyard. Still no cameras or motion lights. Gary doesn't believe in protecting himself, which works perfectly in my favor. The second floor has a light on, one window glowing through the trees. It's past midnight, but the bastard's still awake.

I spot the balcony, and it's not too high; I can make it up without equipment. Gripping the stone edge, I climb up and haul myself over without making a sound. The balcony door handle turns easily. Unlocked.

Gary fucking Miller doesn't believe in basic security. Perfect for what I need to do.

I need to be careful not to wake his wife. Moving through the house, I hear movement downstairs and start down the staircase one step at a time. Light from the refrigerator glows in the kitchen, then disappears as someone closes the door. I pull out my gun and click the safety off. The giant man with gray hair turns around at the sound with his mouth full, holding a cookie he just bit into. He gasps and starts backing up, then stops suddenly and grabs his throat, making choking sounds.

I stop and watch him drop to his knees, still gripping his throat.

"Heee," he tries to say, grabbing at his neck again while his face turns red.

"Help," comes out as a wheeze, and he tries to cough but nothing happens. I walk over to the counter and lean against it, watching with a grin while he chokes on a fucking cookie. I was prepared to stage a fall down the stairs. This works better.

When his body finally slumps forward, I step over him, grab a cookie off the tray and eat it on my way out.

THE HOUSE THAT KELLY USED TO LIVE IN WITH DAVID COLLINS LOOKS smaller than I expected.

I wonder how many times David hurt Kelly inside these walls. How many times he promised he would change and wouldn't hurt him anymore. Only to break that promise the next day and hurt him again. I've gotten more details over the past two weeks, and I'm not going to make it a quick death for this asshole.

Mendez is tied and gagged in the back of our car currently.

"Are we going to do this, or are we just going to sit here all night?" Mikhail asks with a sigh.

"Let me go in first, and I'll text you when to bring in the other asshole."

"Whatever." He pulls out his phone and plays some game.

I step into the freezing night air.

The neck gaiter and hoodie go on, then I move along the side of the house toward the back. Daniil said there were cameras and a security

system—this one needs care.

A camera sits mounted beside the back door. Spray paint comes out, the can rattles once, and the lens disappears under black.

At the lock, I crouch and work it until it clicks. The door opens a few inches before the security chain catches. I slip inside as far as it allows and disable it fast, no alarms triggered. The security panel is already waiting; the code goes in, the system dies, and the door closes behind me without a sound.

The place reeks. Trash litters the floor, beer bottles everywhere, the air thick and musty. Broken glass crunches underfoot as I move through the kitchen and into the living room. Nothing. No movement.

Light flickers from a television in the back room. I stop, scan, then turn toward the stairs and take the first step up.

A sound freezes me mid-step. A baseball bat swings into view. I duck and it smashes into the wall behind me with a sharp crack.

“What the hell,” he screams, and the stench of alcohol hits my face immediately.

I kick him in the stomach, and he falls onto the floor. He tries to get back on his feet, but I stomp on his hand. I pull down my neck gaiter so he can see my face.

“Time to die, David.”

I pick up the bat and hit him over the head before he can answer me. He groans, so I hit him again harder until he passes out.

I send a quick text to Mikhail to get his ass in here. Then crouch and pull out plastic zip ties to secure his hands behind his back. I run upstairs to make sure the house is clear. When I return, Mikhail’s dragging a bleeding Mendez inside.

“What now?” Mikhail asks.

“The houses in this neighborhood are too close together. We should move them to the basement.”

I grab David by his shirt, dragging his unconscious body toward the basement door. I curse when I see the steep stairs. There’s no way I’m carrying his dead weight down there.

I grip him by his shirt, position him at the top of the stairs, and throw him down.

“He slipped.” I shrug.

Mikhail scoffs and pushes Mendez down the stairs too. We position them in the middle of the basement. I crack open smelling salts under David's nose to wake him up. He gasps and jerks back, groaning. He looks over at his partner tied up next to him, scans the room, then his gaze lands on me.

His eyes widen with terror. I walk over and pull off his gag. He starts coughing, groaning, drool running down his chin.

"What is happening?" he slurs. "Mendez, are you hurt? What the fuck is going on?"

Mendez shakes his head and stares at the floor. Won't even look at his partner.

I narrow my eyes. This bastard isn't surprised or panicked like he should be. Most people scream, beg, ask why. He just accepted his fate the second we grabbed him.

He won't even look at David. Won't try to reassure him or figure out an escape plan. He's already given up. Knows exactly why he's here. The question is what he's been hiding and how deep his secrets go.

"*Something's off about this one. He's not questioning why he's here. Won't respond to his partner. I'm going to find out what it is. Are you staying?*" I say in Russian.

Mikhail shrugs. "*Staying.*"

I walk over to the wall, pick up a crowbar, test the weight. The metal feels good in my hands. I stop in front of David and bring it up slowly, let it touch his temple and tap it once.

He flinches and looks at me, blinking. "I … I recognize you. You're Alexei Avrorin."

David's voice cracks. "I know what you do for your family. Jesus Christ, I worked the Ricci massacre. The crime scene photos were … fuck, they were the worst thing I've ever seen in my entire career. It took the coroner three days just to identify all the pieces. We had to use dental records because there weren't enough intact body parts left. You're not human. You're a fucking butcher." He shudders, pulling against the restraints. "You can't do this. We're police officers. You can't touch us."

He's seen what I leave behind. Knows exactly what I'm capable of. Which means he already knows how much this is going to hurt.

"What did you get out of it? Beating someone until they couldn't fight back anymore. Making them feel small. Worthless. Did it make you feel

powerful?”

He looks confused for a moment. “What are you talking about?”

Then understanding clicks. “Wait. Are you talking about Kelly?”

He actually laughs, short and bitter. “Wait, how do you even know Kelly? What does he have to do with you?”

Mendez flinches at Kelly’s name, but he keeps his eyes on the floor.

I grab David’s hair, yank his head back so he’s forced to look into my eyes. I slam my fist into his face. His head snaps back. He coughs, spits blood.

“Wait, wait … Your family has a contract with the police commissioner. You’re not allowed to kill cops unless it’s agreed to. We all know about that rule.”

“Some rules are meant to be broken. Especially when you touched something that’s mine.”

He spits more blood. “Yours? What? How do you even know him? Kelly isn’t yours. He was going to come back to me. He just needed—”

I swing the crowbar into his ribs before he can finish. Bone snaps with a crack that bounces off the walls. His screams fill the basement, loud enough to make my ears ring.

“Kelly has problems,” he gasps out. “Serious mental problems. He makes things up, twists—”

I hit him again. Same spot. Harder.

“He threw himself down the stairs and blamed it on—”

The crowbar connects with his knee. Something inside him gives way. He’s sobbing now, gasping for air.

“Stop talking about him. Every word you say makes this worse for you.”

But he can’t help himself. “I swear I didn’t touch him. Not once. He came at me. I had to defend—”

I drop the crowbar and grab his arm and twist. He shrieks.

“You broke his arm in self-defense?”

“Yes! He attacked me. I just pushed him away—”

I twist harder. Something grinds. “Liar.”

“I’m not lying! He makes people feel sorry for him. He manipulates—”

I let go of his arm and swing the crowbar into his shoulder. Blood and snot run down his face. His cheekbone collapses with a crunch of the bar. Blood sprays across the concrete.

Mendez is shaking, staring at the floor.

David's barely conscious but still trying to talk through broken teeth. "I … I love him—"

Love.

I hit him again. And again. And again. Each time he tries to say Kelly's name. Each time he tries to justify what he did.

When I stop, he can't form words anymore.

I lean in. "You called me a butcher for what I do for my family." I smile. "Now you get to find out you were right."

That's all I say before I kick him so hard in the chest his chair tilts back and crashes to the floor. His head cracks against the concrete. Then I position myself over his arm, place my boot exactly where Kelly's break was, and bring my full weight down. The crack is louder than I expected. His scream fills the basement, raw and desperate.

All I can think about is Kelly flinching every time someone moves too fast. The way he automatically makes himself smaller. How he thinks he's weak.

This piece of shit trained those responses into him, and now he gets to experience what Kelly felt.

I move methodically through everything he told me David did to him, taking my time, making sure he understands exactly why this is happening. When there's nothing left but gurgling and twitching, I finish it. The blade cuts through flesh and bone, and his head rolls free.

I drag my sleeve across my face, smearing blood and worse across my cheek. Useless. I'm painted in crimson. My clothes are soaked through, heavy with gore, sticking to my skin.

The floor's a lake of red, David's pieces spread so wide you can't tell what used to be what. Mendez's face is gray as concrete, pupils blown wide with shock. He hasn't moved since I pulled out David's intestines.

"*Father is going to murder us when he finds out about this. You know that, right?*" Mikhail comments.

"*So what? I don't give a fuck what kind of deal he has with the police. This bastard almost destroyed Kelly.*"

I turn to face him. "*How would you feel if someone hurt Daniil like this?*"

I know this will get through to him. Mikhail's protective as hell when it comes to him.

“*I would kill them.*”

“*Exactly.*”

He sighs and rubs his eyebrow. “*This is going to be a mess to clean up.*”

This is it. The moment everything changes. Roman will demand explanations for why I tortured two cops without orders, and I’ll have to tell him about Kelly. About loving a man. About choosing him over family expectations.

But watching him recover, seeing how this piece of shit damaged him? I’d rather burn it all down than let anyone hurt him again. Kelly will know he’s worth fighting for. Worth claiming. Worth protecting at any cost.

I walk across the room and grab David’s severed head by what’s left of his matted hair, then hurl it at Mendez’s feet. Blood splatters across his shoes as it hits the concrete with a wet, hollow thud. “Your turn. Talk.”

He lets out a shaky breath. “What do you want to know?”

He’s hiding something bigger than just being David’s partner, and I can feel it crawling under my skin.

“Everything,” I say and rub my jaw, tasting copper.

I crouch in front of him and keep my eyes locked on his. “You won’t like it when I get bored, so make it quick.”

He stares at me, then takes a deep breath. “David didn’t know about the rest of it. We were just skimming evidence money together, that’s all he knew. But I-I was approached months ago by someone who knew about my financial situation. They offered me cash for information. Small things at first, nothing that seemed important. They said they worked for the Nozares family.” He swallows hard. “But then we got forced into surveilling your family. We sent warnings to them when we knew the Avrorins were moving on targets. That’s how you got shot.”

I keep my face locked down tight, but my blood’s buzzing, and my hands twitch with the need to put them around his throat.

“Go on.”

“David’s father,” he says, voice barely above a whisper. “He’s a retired captain. Before, he was a detective. He’s the one who recruited me, been feeding information to the Nozares family for years. He’s the leak you’ve been searching for.”

We’ve always been on top ever since we came to America and took New York from their control twenty years ago. Dismantled their empire piece by piece until they had nothing.

So why now? Why are they making moves?

I've heard rumors about their leader, Santiago Nozares. He's been acting strange. Erratic. Making decisions that don't make sense. His sons are trying to cover for him, but everyone's noticed. His sons are probably using it. Letting the old man think he's building an empire again while they make the real plays behind the scenes.

But there's something more to this. I can feel it.

This isn't just a desperate power grab from a family that's lost everything. There's a plan here. Something bigger.

"*Fuck. I had no idea this guy was even involved. What are the odds I found the fucking rat who got me shot?*" I laugh, but there's no humor in it.

"*I told you it wasn't my fault,*" Mikhail mutters.

I roll my eyes and walk over and pick up the crowbar, holding it out to him. "*Want to finish this one? We need to take care of David's father tonight when we are done here. Text Daniil and ask for an address.*"

He takes it but points it at me instead of Mendez. "*I'm getting tired of this family blaming me for everything that goes wrong. One day, I'm going to fucking snap.*"

He walks toward Mendez. The crowbar splits his skull open with a sharp crack.

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Chapter 24

Kelly

The sound of the keyboard tapping echoes across the room while I scroll through job listings. Squinting at the screen through the lingering headache that's been my constant companion since the concussion. I'm so done with the harassment from Gary. Though he hasn't messaged me in twenty-four hours, which is a goddamn miracle. Next time he calls, I'm telling him I'm done.

There aren't many openings right now. I did just send an application to one of the biggest clinics in New York even though I probably don't stand a chance of getting called for an interview. Still felt productive to send it, like I'm actually doing something to get out of this mess.

Alexei walks in with his hair still wet from a shower. Probably washing off evidence from one of his little "jobs." I roll my eyes and keep tapping at the keys while he brushes past the counter, kisses the top of my head, then heads straight to the freezer and pulls out a bottle of vodka and taking a sip straight from the bottle.

"Really? It's nine in the morning."

He starts to respond, but my phone vibrates against the counter. I wave him off and answer without checking the caller ID.

Camilla's voice blasts through the speaker so loud I have to pull the phone away from my ear. "Jesus, wait, slow down. Start over. You're making my ear fall off."

She sighs. "Sorry, forgot you're sensitive to sound right now. I still feel so guilty for missing your call at the hospital. I'm so sorry about that." She pauses. "Anyway, Gary is dead."

"Gary is what?"

Alexei chokes on his vodka. Takes another sip, screws the cap on, then walks out of the kitchen without a word.

I narrow my eyes after him. That was suspicious as hell. He didn't … right?

"He's dead, Kelly."

"They found him at home this morning. His wife said he woke up in the middle of the night, started choking on food, couldn't call for help."

Oh. Just a coincidence then.

"Wow. What a shame."

"I know, right? He'll be so missed." She coughs to cover a laugh. "Not."

I laugh too. I mean, Alexei couldn't have killed him by making him choke on food … There's no way that's even possible.

I shake my head and push the thought away before it can take root.

"I was thinking of sending in my resignation anyway. I applied to a few different jobs this morning."

"You did not."

"I did."

"Good for you. And seriously, send it in. Screw that clinic." Her voice drops. "I didn't tell you before, but I applied to vet school."

I know she's been thinking about this for months, weighing it, doubting herself, talking herself out of it every time we brought it up. I'm so proud of her.

"That's incredible. You'll do amazing, I know you will. You can ask me anything you want to know about the program, seriously."

She starts rambling. I let her go because it's nice hearing her sound like this instead of stressed about work or worried about me.

Alexei walks away, looking sheepish in those sexy black workout shorts, heading toward the home gym like he's trying to escape from me.

"Hey, Camilla, can I call you later?"

I shut the laptop with a soft click, then follow him.

I don't even know how to say what's churning in my head. I need to know if there's some kind of future we can plan for. Something outside this house, outside all the hiding. I also kind of want to set some basic ground rules about murder and maybe discuss boundaries around killing people who make my life difficult.

The sound of weights clanking and Russian rap blasting through the speakers hits me before I even reach the door. I stop in the doorway, while

he pretends he doesn’t see me.

“So, I just got an interesting call …”

He stops mid-deadlift and looks at me, then drops the weight without warning. The floor shakes from the impact.

“I heard.”

“Alexei …”

Ignoring me, he just bends and grips the bar like I didn’t say his name at all. Lifts it again with a grunt, then drops it with another floor-shaking crash.

I roll my eyes and walk over, stopping directly in front of him.

“You didn’t, right?”

Once again, he stares at me with an undecipherable expression.

“You haven’t even asked how he died,” I hedge.

He scoffs and shakes his head. “I don’t need details. Bastard had it coming.”

Then he bends again and lifts with perfect form, the weight belt around his waist pulling tighter while his muscles strain under the load. Beads of sweat roll down his chest. I hate that my mouth waters even when I’m trying to have a serious conversation about potential murder. The weight slams down again. He walks past me like nothing happened, grabbing a water bottle and taking a long sip before ripping off the waist belt.

“Look at me.”

He looks at me with raised brows.

“I need to talk to you. I—” But I don’t get to finish because something crashes in the living room, followed immediately by shouting.

Alexei’s eyes widen and he turns off the music and grabs my wrists before I can react. I flinch so hard the room tilts. My concussion makes everything blur for a second. The taste of metal floods my mouth from biting my tongue.

He freezes, his grip loosening. His eyes flick down to where he’s holding me, and he drops his hand like it burned him. Takes a step back.

“Sorry, *zaychik*. I didn’t mean to scare you.” His voice softens, panicked now. “But you need to hide.”

The roaring in my ears makes it hard to think. Something is wrong.

I nod, starting to scan the room desperately for anywhere I could disappear. I spot a built-in wardrobe and move toward it, but I don’t even

make it two steps before he catches my wrists again, gentler this time, and pulls me against his chest.

I look at him, and his expression knocks the air out of me. All that violence, coldness I've gotten used to, completely gone. Just raw terror mixed with guilt and something that looks like goodbye.

He frames my jaw, tilting my face, then kisses me—just a press of lips that barely lasts a second.

Footsteps pound closer down the hallway, and the shouting grows louder, more urgent.

"I think my father found out what we did. I can't hide you anymore. Stay behind me. Don't say anything. Don't move unless I tell you to."

He positions himself like a wall between me and the door.

I want to ask what he means, what's happening, but I don't get the chance before men crowd the doorway. Five of them in dark suits, standing shoulder to shoulder.

Another man steps into view. Tall, early sixties, wearing a sharp black suit. Dark hair streaked with gray, neat beard, tinted glasses. Something about him makes my skin numb.

He adjusts his cuffs. Then shouts in Russian.

Alexei answers, but the tension in his shoulders tells me everything I need to know. They're fighting. About me.

The old man's eyes snap directly to me. He lifts his hand and gestures toward me like I'm something he wants removed. Then he pulls out a gun and points it at Alexei.

I take a step back, heart hammering against my ribs.

Alexei doesn't hesitate. Three fast steps and he's on the man. Grabs the gun, twists it out of his grip, and shoves him hard against the wall. The gun is now pressed to the man's temple.

All the guards pull their weapons and point them at Alexei.

No, no, no, no—

My lungs seize. The air in the room turns to concrete. That's his father. Has to be. The one who would put a bullet in his own son's head for liking men. And Alexei just pressed a gun to his temple without hesitating.

His father tries to shove him off, but Alexei doesn't budge. So, his father brandishes a knife and presses it against Alexei's throat. Blood wells up and drips down his neck.

Alexei doesn’t react. Just keeps the gun pressed to his father’s head while blood runs down his bare chest.

They’re both shouting at each other in Russian. My brain tries to grab onto something, anything, but it’s all noise. White noise. Static. I’m trapped in my own head, standing here with my hands useless at my sides while Alexei *bleeds*.

A woman around the same age as his father steps into view, black hair braided back. She shouts at them and runs up to Alexei, grabbing his arm, trying to pull him off.

He doesn’t move. His father presses the blade deeper, blood running faster down his neck. She screams louder at them. The realization hits me like ice water. This is Alexei’s mother trying to pry her son off his own father while he holds a knife to Alexei’s throat.

The older man’s eyes flick to me. He nods in my direction with a cold smile and says something cold. The guards point the guns at me.

The world tilts sideways. My hands fly up, palms out, like that’s going to do anything against guns. My legs almost give out.

They’re actually going to shoot me. Right here. Alexei’s going to watch it happen with a blade pressed to his throat, and he can’t do anything. I can’t do anything. We’re both just—

The gunshot cracks through the room.

My ears ring, sharp and painful. The bullet slams into the wall next to his father’s head, and chunks of plaster scatter across the floor.

Every gun swings back to Alexei. Away from me.

I suck in air. When did I stop breathing?

Alexei takes a step back, gun still raised and says something in Russian. His voice is flat. Cold. Deadly. He points at me with his free hand.

His father spits on the floor. He points the knife toward me and says something, then at Alexei, his face twisting with so much disgust I feel it like a physical blow. The woman gasps, hand flying to her chest.

I don’t speak Russian. Don’t need to.

The meaning’s clear enough.

Abomination.

Disgrace.

Wrong.

The woman’s hand cracks across his father’s face hard enough to snap his head to the side. She starts yelling even louder at him this time. His

father spits on the ground again while ignoring her, then he turns and walks out. The guards follow.

Alexei clicks the safety. Prowls over to me and pulls me against his chest. He kisses the top of my head, panting. “You’re okay, *zaychik*. You’re safe.”

I try to answer. I can’t. My throat has closed up completely. My hands are trembling so violently I have to fist them on his shorts just to hold on.

He almost died. He was going to kill his own father. For me. Would have done it without hesitating, and I would have watched it happen.

The woman clears her throat.

Alexei turns us both toward her, keeping me tucked against his side as if he’s afraid if he lets go, I’ll disappear. She looks wrecked. Eyes red and swollen, chest heaving. She says something in Russian, then glances at me.

“He doesn’t understand Russian,” Alexei says.

She sighs and fixes her dress with shaking hands, then gestures down the hall. “Follow me.”

Alexei immediately grabs my hand. Laces our fingers together so tight it almost hurts. And pulls me with him.

We walk after her down the hallway. When I glance over, Alexei’s still holding that gun. Blood still drips from the cut on his neck. He hasn’t wiped it away. Hasn’t even acknowledged it.

My brain won’t shut up.

The guards are waiting around the corner.

His father is coming back.

They’re going to separate us.

But when we get to the living room, it’s empty.

She sits on the couch and wipes her hand over her forehead, letting out a deep breath.

Alexei walks us to the opposite couch and we sit. My heart is still hammering against my ribs. His entire neck is covered in blood, dark red dripping down his chest.

A tear escapes before I can stop it. I swipe at my face, but it’s too late.

His eyes lock on mine immediately. Something shifts in his expression, softens for just a second before going flat again.

I guess I should just be happy that we’re still alive.

I glance over at her. Blue eyes. Elegant, expensive jewelry everywhere. The same family crest ring on her hand, the sleeping wolf, but she has

diamonds circling it.

She breaks the silence first. “What is your name?”

I swallow, trying to keep my voice steady. “Kelly Mackey.”

“Kelly.” She nods. “I’m Kapitolina. You can call me Lina.” She studies me. “You understand what my family is, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then you understand the danger you’re in. This isn’t personal. My husband doesn’t know you, doesn’t care who you are. You’re a problem that needs eliminating. That’s how he sees it.”

Alexei tenses. “Why are we still following these rules? They don’t make sense. Your father killed your twin brother for loving another man, and you’re still defending this behavior?”

So that’s the world Alexei grew up in. That’s what he meant when he said men get killed for this.

Lina’s voice rises, and she points at him with a shaking finger. “Your father is furious with you and Mikhail for what you did to those officers. We have a deal with the commissioner, and you know that. Roman has eyes everywhere. Did you think no one would notice two cops going missing? That someone wouldn’t talk? One of them had a wife.”

She shakes her head. “When you explained you did it because of him?” Gesturing sharply toward me. “That made it worse. Your father wants you both dead.”

What did they do?

She wipes a tear away.

“My brother,” Lina continues, voice going flat. “Evgeny. He was gentle, kind. He loved a man from another family. They were careful, hid it well. My father found out anyway. Had them both killed. Made an example.

“I felt it when he died. I was in the city shopping. Felt this pain in my chest, like someone carved me open. I knew he was gone before they even called to tell me.”

“If my father tries anything, he’s dead,” Alexei says flatly, looking at her. “Even if I have to kill him myself.”

She clicks her tongue sharply. “I couldn’t save Evgeny. I won’t fail you. You’re my son. Your father thinks he can’t be moved on this. He’s wrong. He’ll bend, but it won’t happen overnight. Until then, neither of you leaves this property. You don’t go anywhere without guards.”

“Guards loyal to you or to him?” Alexei asks.

“Both. They’ll keep you alive and report everything you do. It’s the compromise that keeps him from killing you.”

“That’s not protection, that’s surveillance.”

“It’s both. Be smart about it.”

She looks down at the floor, and I feel Alexei’s arm wrap around me. His lips press against the side of my head. His blood is still wet, warm, smearing across my arm.

“I wish you’d come to me about this sooner, Alexei,” she says.

Her chin trembles. Her accent thickens. “I would have protected you. I hope you know that.”

Alexei’s arms tighten around me. He doesn’t say anything. Just stares at her.

She turns to me. “I hope we didn’t scare you too much, Kelly. I know that was intense, but I always stick to my word. You are safe. I would never lie about something like this.”

Her expression softens. “I love my children. I want to know more about you.”

I swallow. “Thank you. That really means a lot. I didn’t mean to cause trouble for your family. I’m so sorry, I—”

“Don’t say sorry,” Alexei cuts me off. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

He looks at his mother. “She’s right. I’ve been a coward. I should have gone to her sooner.”

Lina shakes her head. “No, you are the strongest person I know.”

She stands, smoothing her coat. Walks over to us.

I stand automatically, legs barely supporting me.

She looks at me. “I need you to understand something. My son just threatened to kill his father for you. He would have done it without hesitation. That means you matter more to him than anything else in his life. More than family, more than survival. Do you understand the weight of that?”

I nod, throat too tight to speak.

“Good. Don’t waste it.”

She moves to the door. We follow, my legs shaking with each step. At the door, she cups Alexei’s face and says something soft in Russian. He closes his eyes and nods. Then she glances at me one last time before walking out.

The door clicks shut behind her.

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Chapter 25

Alexei

I turn from the door, adrenaline still burning through my system. Blood still drips down my neck. Kelly launches himself at me, legs wrapping around my waist. I catch him, arms locking around him on instinct. Burying my face into his neck, his shoulder, his hair. Kissing him there without thinking, just needing to feel that he's real and safe.

The gun felt right in my hand. Pressed against Father's temple. Finger on the trigger.

I was going to do it. Kill my own father in my house, in front of his guards, with my mother watching. And the only thing I felt was calm.

Not anger. Not fear. Not even regret about what it would mean. Just cold certainty that if he made one more move toward Kelly, he was dead.

Should probably feel something about that. Guilt, maybe. Horror at how close I came to committing patricide. But nothing. Just the clinical assessment of how I'd have done it. Where the bullet would've gone. How fast the guards would've reacted. Whether I could've gotten Kelly out before they shot me.

Probably not. Didn't matter.

Better to die with Kelly than live without him. Simple math. I'd have torn my own heart out with my bare hands and pressed it into Kelly's while I still had breath left, made sure he knew he was worth dying for. Father saw it in my eyes. That's why he didn't push further. He knew I meant it. I did mean it. Still do.

"Are you okay?"

"I was about to ask you that," I murmur into his skin, breathing him in.

He kisses me, soft but urgent. “I’m proud of you,” he whispers against my lips. “What you did was huge. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. This isn’t wrong. Who you love, none of it is wrong.”

I close my eyes and nod once. There’s too much lodged in my throat to speak.

He stays wrapped around me the whole walk to the bedroom.

When I lay him on the bed, I don’t let go. Follow him down and pull the covers around us, then wrap myself around him. Arms locked across his chest. I press my face into the crook of his neck, just needing to feel him breathing. He’s here. I didn’t lose him. Not over this. Not today.

Mikhail was right about one thing. Our father was always going to find out we killed those cops without permission. But I don’t regret it. Not for a second. After what they did to Kelly, I’d do it again without hesitation. Over and over. I’d carve that bastard up a thousand different ways. He deserved worse than what I gave him.

This will spread like wildfire through our world.

Every family we work with will smell weakness, start circling like vultures.

These aren’t new rules I’m breaking. They’re the foundation everything was built on. But lines are drawn now. I know exactly where everyone stands. Father wanted me to choose, so I did. Kelly’s with me, and anyone who wants to challenge that can try. I’ve been killing for this family my whole life. Time to see what I can do when I’m killing for something I actually give a fuck about.

The worst part was the look on my father’s face when he saw Kelly in that room with me. Pure disgust. I’ve never seen him look at any of us like that before. Not even after the worst stunts me and my brothers pulled growing up. Nothing came close to how he looked at me in that moment. Like killing me would’ve been easier than having to see what I’d become.

When he said I wasn’t his son anymore, he meant it.

“Alexei …”

I hum and press a kiss to the top of his head.

He turns in my arms, wrapping his hands around my neck and looking at me. His eyes are glassy, that soft green a little darker.

“I love you so much it physically hurts. I’ve been completely lost to you from the start, and I wouldn’t change a single thing about how we got here. I want to spend forever showing you what love is supposed to feel like.”

The words slam into me harder than any punch I've taken. First time anyone's said that to me. My mother doesn't count. That was different. This is something I never thought I'd hear from anyone.

I close my eyes and feel something crack open in my chest. "I love you too."

He wraps his arms tighter around me and buries his face in my neck.

"You're mine until I stop breathing. Maybe longer. I don't know how death works, but I'll figure out a way to haunt you if I have to. You're never alone again. I won't let you be."

He huffs a laugh and nods into my neck.

I'm sick with how much I love him. Twisted up in ways that would send him running if he knew. I've been his since the second I met him in that clinic, those green eyes soft with kindness I didn't deserve. Stitching me while he rambled. Every word from that night is burned into my memory.

I replay it when I can't sleep, when I can't think straight, when I need to remember why I'm still breathing.

He lets go of me and walks to the bathroom, returns with the first aid kit. His entire gray shirt is covered in my blood from hugging me, even some smeared across his chin. He wipes away the blood on my neck, looking at the cut. "This needs stitches."

I'd forgotten about it. Don't even feel the pain, so I just nod.

His hands are steady as he stitches me up. When he's done, he puts the kit aside and lies with me. He moves his hand through my hair, slow and soothing.

"What did you and Mikhail do?"

I will not lie to him, no matter how much it might hurt him. He deserves the truth from me always.

"We killed David and Mendez." I pause. "And David's father. William."

He clears his throat, looks back at me with eyes a little wider than before, processing what I just told him.

"What? Why would you kill Will? What did he do?"

"He was dirty when he was on the force. Was working with someone who wants to hurt my family now. He had to die."

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Then lets out a breath. "Will was a horrible person. He had serious temper issues. Once drove into my car when he was drunk, then blamed me for the way I parked. He helped David cover up the abuse with his connections."

Fuck. If I had known that I would have drawn out his death. Motherfucker deserved worse than what he got.

Kelly winces. “What about Gary?”

“He did that himself. I startled the hell out of him when I clicked the safety off my gun and then I watched him choke on a cookie in front of me.”

“Oh my god, he did not.”

I raise my brow. “He did.”

“And you didn’t save him?”

“Why the fuck would I save him just to crack his neck after, and then throw him down the stairs? That would’ve been cruel.”

He opens his mouth like he wants to argue, then closes it, then opens it again while scrunching his nose in that way that means he’s working through something. “Wow. That’s some next-level compassion right there. Death by Oreo … Cracking his neck would have been faster.”

I tilt my head. “It was homemade. Not an Oreo.”

“Jesus, not the point.”

“You’re not angry we killed them?”

He exhales and drops his head to my chest, his breath warm against my skin.

“I’m not angry. I feel like I can breathe again. He’s been this nightmare I couldn’t escape, always wondering when he’d come back to finish what he started. I’m relieved he’s gone.”

I glance down at him and breathe in the smell of his hair, filling my lungs up with his scent until it hurts and I have to breathe it out.

“We used his money to pay off all the debt he put you in. It’s the least that asshole could do since he’s the one who caused it in the first place. It won’t get traced back to you. Daniil made sure of it.”

“Thank you,” he whispers. “Are we safe? Will your father kill us?”

“Safe for now. I won’t let anyone hurt you. We can trust my mother.”

At that, he goes slack.

I wrap my arms tighter around him, pulling him closer until there’s no space left between us.

I have no idea how this is going to turn out. None at all.

But I trust my mother when she says Kelly is safe. If she says it, she’ll make it true because she doesn’t make promises she can’t back up.

I know what it cost her to stand in front of him like that today. I know what it brought up for her. All those memories she keeps buried. She was never the same after her brother died.

I was eight the day it happened. I still remember her cries, the way she screamed so hard she fell to the floor. I remember the sound of it, raw and endless.

I'll never forget it. I was old enough to understand that he died for loving another man. Old enough to realize I was already like him. The terror of ending up the same way has lived in my chest ever since, waiting for the day someone would figure me out.

My father proved me right. The disgust, the blade, the immediate decision that I deserve to die. I've carried that nightmare since I was eight years old, and it played out exactly how I always imagined. Expect it didn't end with me bleeding out like Evgeny, condemned by everyone who mattered. My mother stood with me. I don't know how to process that, but it's more than I thought I'd get.

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Chapter 26

Kelly

Clover curls against my side while I tap away on my laptop again. I need the distraction after everything that went down. I already sent in my resignation and applied to a few more jobs. It's not like I'll get any of them, but I needed to do something productive. Anything to keep my hands busy and my mind off the way everything fell apart.

I can't stop thinking about the look on his face when his father saw us together. That moment of pure disgust burned itself into my soul.

He's been quiet since then, withdrawn in a way that has nothing to do with his usual stoic bullshit. He's sad. Not that he'd ever say it or admit it out loud, but I know what it looks like when someone's breaking inside. He's trying so hard to act normal. I keep making stupid jokes or trying to distract him, but nothing works. I think he's depressed, and I don't blame him. It's killing me, I don't know what to do.

My eyes drift out the window without thinking. I blink in surprise. The sky's full of white flickers dancing in the air. At first, I think I'm imagining it, maybe seeing things from staring at the laptop screen too long. But it's real. Snow.

I grin before I can stop myself. I spin around and bolt for the hallway, grabbing my shoes and tearing through the closet like a maniac looking for my coat. I'm not missing the first snowfall of the year.

I loved December and Christmas when my mom was alive.

I run toward the sliding door so fast I nearly slip and faceplant on the hardwood. I yank my coat on, shove my feet into my shoes, and swing the door open.

The cold air hits me right in the face and steals my breath completely. I step out anyway.

My breath fogs in front of me in little puffs. It's freezing, brutal enough to make my skin sting. It's perfect.

The snowflakes land softly on my cheeks. I close my eyes, breathing in deep.

I hear the sliding door open behind me. Arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me back against a solid chest. I lean into the touch. His mouth brushes my neck with soft kisses that are slow and careful. He holds me tighter against him like he's trying to anchor us both.

"It's freezing out here," he murmurs against my skin. "What are you doing?"

"It's December," I say, my breath fogging in the cold air. "This will be my first Christmas without my mom."

His arms drop for just a second, then he turns me around to face him.

"You have me," he says, looking directly into my eyes. "I'll make this a good Christmas for you."

I press my face into his chest, breathing in his warmth while he holds me without saying anything else.

"I miss her so much," I whisper, and my throat aches while my eyes sting with tears.

"If I could take away your pain, I would." His voice stays low and steady. He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "My father's still breathing, but he's dead to me now. I know what that loss feels like. You won't be alone ever again, *zaychik*. I promise."

I nod.

He runs a hand over my head, slow and careful with his fingers threading through my hair. I let the comfort wash over me.

"Come inside," he murmurs. "You'll get sick. I'll make you tea and we can talk more. If we stay out here, I think my balls might actually freeze off."

I laugh and let him go, stepping back reluctantly.

He grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together, and we walk back into the house. I kick off my shoes while he hangs my coat on the bar chairs, then starts making tea. When he turns back around with the kettle, I notice his knuckles are cut up fresh, bruised, and still a little bloody.

"What happened to your hands?" I ask, nodding toward the damage.

“Filed a complaint into someone’s face at the office. Very hands-on approach.”

I roll my eyes and sigh. His father refuses to acknowledge him anymore. All his orders come through his brothers now, as if Alexei doesn’t exist.

He turns around as the kettle starts to rumble with water just about to boil, then brings me a mug with the tea bag already in it.

“Thanks.”

He nods toward the living room.

I follow him with my tea and sit down next to him. He pulls me closer until my legs are draped across his thighs, one hand on my back, the other resting over my shins. I settle my head on his shoulder, sinking into the warmth of his body. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

I nod and bring my cup to my lips for a careful sip. His hand moves over my back in slow, lazy strokes, up and down, warm through the fabric of my shirt.

Is this crazy? Maybe. But I’m past the point of caring.

I’m curled up with someone who kills people for a living. Who’s got fresh cuts on his knuckles from whatever he did an hour ago. But when he holds me like this, none of that matters. I knew what he was when I chose him. Still choosing him now.

“Are you okay with everything that happened?” He looks so sad, it breaks my heart.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s okay if you’re not,” I whisper.

“I’m not good at talking about what I feel, *zaychik*. I’ve spent my whole life learning how not to.”

I let out a breath and nod against him.

He told me he saw his mother break apart when she found out her brother died and that he was terrified the same would happen to him. His whole life he thought his own family would turn on him if they ever found out he was gay.

Twenty-seven years of hiding who he was. All those years thinking the people who were supposed to love him would reject him for something he couldn’t control.

I’m grateful we found each other when we did, even if it was because he broke into that clinic and pulled a gun on me.

“I love you so much.” I press a kiss into his chest.

I feel him let out a breath and lean down to kiss the top of my head. “I would rip myself to pieces if it kept you alive, *zaychik*. What I feel for you goes past love into something consuming, something that lives in my bones. I need you like oxygen. Without you, there’s nothing left worth saving.”

My breath catches in my throat. I stare into his deep brown eyes. His expression is unreadable, but there’s something raw underneath it. No one has ever said anything like that to me before.

“Come here.”

I wrap my hands around his neck and pull him close. He breathes in the scent of my hair, and I feel his chest rise and fall against mine.

I hate seeing him like this. Vulnerable in a way that makes me ache.

An idea hits me.

CHRISTMAS ISN’T EVEN THAT BIG OF A DEAL IN RUSSIA. I ORDERED A custom frame anyway for the selfie we took together with Clover the other day—our first picture together. He never let me try before out of fear of someone seeing it. What do you buy for someone who owns everything and has all the money in the world? Something that matters to him.

I curse and yank more tape, trying to wrap this present on the kitchen counter. They make this look way too easy in stores. I don’t know how to do this. Paper’s all wrinkled and crooked. It looks like a toddler wrapped it.

“Ugh. This is so stupid,” I mutter.

“What is stupid?”

He was supposed to be asleep …

I gasp and snatch the present up, hiding it behind my back like that’s going to fool anyone.

Alexei stands in his boxers, frowning as he takes a step toward me.

“Don’t come closer.”

He takes another step anyway.

“It’s a secret.”

He scoffs and keeps walking toward me with that slow, smug stride that means trouble.

I backpedal frantically, then spin around and take off, clutching the crumpled mess of wrapping paper. His heavy steps thud after me. I glance back to see him running full speed, pissed off and half-naked and gaining on me fast.

He's way too fast for this to end well.

I skid to a stop in the doorway of our bedroom, panting hard. My hands go straight to his chest to stop him from bulldozing past me. "It's a present, okay? Don't ruin this."

"I thought you said no presents."

"Changed my mind."

"You always change your mind this much or just with me?"

"Just with you."

He smirks like he's pleased with himself. "I got you something too."

I blink in surprise.

"I wanted to."

I nod. "Just go back to the living room so I can hide it under the bed."

"You just told me where it is."

I squint at him. "You're not going to open it just because you know where it is."

He hums like maybe he will anyway, then turns around and strolls off, glancing back once with a smug look. His back flexes as he walks, tattoos shifting over muscle. His thighs look smooth and solid, so distracting it should be illegal.

I groan under my breath and drop to my knees with the mangled present. Shove it under my side of the bed. Wrinkled paper, crooked tape, the whole mess, but whatever. It's hidden now.

I head to the living room, but he's not there.

The clank of a weight hitting metal makes me roll my eyes.

I follow the sound down the hall and step into the home gym. There he is, topless in just black workout shorts slung low on his hips, one leg pulled up behind him as he stretches. His hand grips his ankle, that V-cut slicing deep into his hips while his abs flex with every shift of his body.

I swallow hard and try not to stare. Whatever's coming after his dad's reaction to finding us together, I just hope it's not too bad. I don't want them turning on him because of me. It's so backwards and sad that this is even an issue.

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Chapter 27

Alexei

The sound of music jolts me out of sleep. I sit up fast, my heart pounding against my ribs. I glance around the room. Kelly's not in bed anymore.

I rub a hand down my face and listen to the music drifting through the house. I narrow my eyes. Is that … the Spice Girls? His playlist is a complete disaster, but I'll keep that opinion to myself. If it makes him happy, fine.

I drag myself out of bed and follow the sound, which gets louder the closer I get to the kitchen. Something smells burnt, and yeah, that's definitely the Spice Girls blasting through the speakers.

I stop in the doorway and spot Kelly humming while whisking something in a bowl, completely oblivious to my presence. My eyes drop to his pink socks with rabbits on them. I'm going to have to add those to my growing collection of his things.

I walk over to him and reach out and touch his shoulder.

He jumps like I tased him and smacks my hand away. "Jesus Christ. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

I walk over to the speaker and turn it off, then point to the pan on the stove. "Something's burning."

He turns around fast, swears under his breath, and flips the stove off. "I was trying to surprise you with pancakes. It's what my mom used to do when I was sad."

He moves the pan to the sink and runs water over it. The sizzle is violent and loud enough to make me wince. He leans forward and rests his forehead on the counter with his arms crossed over his head, letting out a long groan that sounds defeated.

Then he turns and scrunches his nose at me. “I’m really bad at cooking.”

“I am aware.”

He shoots me a look. “Thanks for the support.”

“I’m not going to lie and tell you you’re good at this. You’re not.”

He huffs and rolls his eyes. “Well, we’ve got two pancakes that aren’t burned. I was kind of hoping we could take a walk after? Just to clear our heads a bit?”

I glance out the window at the gray sky and bare trees. It looks miserable out there, windy and cold as hell.

“No,” I say flatly. “But I can fuck you so hard you can’t walk, then we eat those two sad pancakes.”

He opens his mouth like he’s going to argue, then closes it again. I don’t wait for a response. I walk over and lift him up over my shoulder, smacking his ass once to make him yelp.

I carry him to the kitchen island and set him down gently with my hands still around his hips, then lean in and crash my mouth to his. He tastes like cinnamon and pancake batter.

“It’s so sexy when you carry me around,” he murmurs against my lips.

I don’t answer with words. I kiss him again, slower this time, deeper, just so he’ll feel what I can’t say out loud. That I need this. That I need him. That I need to forget everything else for a while.

I feel his hands grab at my shirt. I want to bury myself in him until I forget the look on my father’s face, until none of it matters except this.

I swirl my tongue against his and pull him tight into me. Not letting him breathe properly. My mouth drags down his neck slowly with my teeth scraping against his skin. I suck hard just below his jaw to leave a mark.

I tug his shirt up and over his head, dropping it somewhere on the floor, then grab him by the waist with my grip rough and possessive.

“On your hands and knees,” I mutter against his throat.

“Here?” His voice comes out breathless.

“*Da*.”

He hesitates for just a second, then climbs up like I told him to. His knees pressed into the edge of the counter and his arms braced in front of him. His back arches just enough to make me lose my breath completely.

I grab his waistband and drag everything down in one motion, my grip tightening while I take in the sight of him.

Fucking perfect.

He’s bent forward, flushed, vulnerable in a way that makes my chest ache. I lean in and kiss along his lower back, slow and rough, then down between his thighs, hands gripping hard to keep him close when he twitches.

He gasps when I get my mouth on him.

I hold him tighter and keep going, tongue working deep, slow, wet around his hole. He jerks forward. I pull him back and hold him there, keep my mouth on him until his legs start shaking.

“Alexei, you’re—” he pants, one hand curling against the marble.

I press in deeper, let him feel it. One hand slides between his legs and I push in slow, careful, until he moans so broken it almost undoes me.

When I pull back and let go, his whole body jolts.

“Turn around,” I mutter, voice low.

He glances over his shoulder, face red, lips parted, eyes blown wide. Then he nods.

I walk over to the kitchen cabinet and pull out a brand-new bottle of lube.

“Why do you have lube in your kitchen cabinet?”

I shrug, walking back to him. “I put them everywhere so I can have you on every surface in this house.”

I crash my lips to his and push my tongue inside his mouth, swirling it around with his own. I pour some lube onto my fingers, bring my hands down past his balls, down his taint and inside of him. He gasps into my mouth while I work him open. First with one, then two, then work myself up to three.

I pull them out of him, then unbutton my jeans while keeping eye contact with him. Pulling my hard, aching cock out, he licks his lips, looking down at my length and then looks back up into my eyes. Putting the leftover lube onto myself, I pull him by his hips and position myself by his hole.

Looking up at him, he nods at me, and I push myself inside him slowly. He’s so tight, stretching around me. He gasps and grabs the counter at the edges and tilts his head back, his throat bobbing.

I push myself fully inside. He looks up at me with pure need and hunger. The feeling is incredible—his warmth and tightness make me close my eyes and groan.

Grabbing his hips harder, I start thrusting into him, the sound echoing around the room. “You are taking me so fucking well. Look at you stretching around me.”

My hand moves from his hip to reach for his cock. He moans at the contact. I swipe my finger over his tip, pre-cum leaks all over my hand, warm and messy against my palm while I work him over. Moans slipping out of him while I thrust.

My balls start filling with tightness. “You’re going to make me lose it, *zaychik*. You feel so fucking good wrapped around me. I need to fill you up.”

Thrusting into him harder, I drop my head to his shoulder and shudder, spilling inside of him while still gripping his hard cock. Pulling out immediately, I push my fingers inside instead, keeping my cum where it belongs, then bend down and take his cock into my mouth. Tongue out, cheeks hollowed, I take him deep into my throat while his hands slide into my hair with a tight grip, moaning loudly.

“So close. Don’t stop, please don’t stop, Alexei.” The desperation in his voice is perfect.

His cock swells across my tongue before warm, salty cum fills my mouth. I swallow every drop like a starved man, tongue working over him greedily, cleaning him until there’s nothing left. He’s shaking and spent, but I keep him in my mouth because he doesn’t get to tell me when I’m done.

“*Kakogo huya?*” What the fuck?

I lift my head and spot Mikhail and Daniil standing right in the middle of the living room with both of their mouths hanging open. Mikhail spins around and slaps his hands over his eyes while Daniil just stands there grimacing.

“*Blyat*, I did not need to see that,” Mikhail groans loudly. “I need bleach for my eyes.”

Kelly buries himself against my chest so fast it almost knocks the wind out of me. I pull my fingers out of him and wrap my arms around him and kiss the side of his head while his voice comes out muffled against my skin. “Jesus, do none of your family knock?”

I glare at my brothers over Kelly’s head. “What are you doing here?”

Mikhail walks backward toward the hallway with his hands still covering his face. “No words until you’re dressed. I mean it. I need therapy

and a lobotomy to erase this image out of my fucking brain, dude. We'll be anywhere else. Jesus Christ, put your junk back into your pants."

Daniil freezes for another second, then blinks and spins around fast, shaking his head.

I help Kelly down from the counter, keeping my hand on his waist as he pulls his clothes on with shaking hands. I yank my pants up and buckle myself.

"I'm going to take a shower. You're on your own with this," Kelly says, jerking his chin toward the bathroom.

I nod and sigh as he disappears down the hallway before I stalk after my two idiot brothers.

I find them in the home gym. Mikhail pacing like a caged dog, rubbing his hands through his buzz cut and muttering to himself. Daniil's half-seated on the edge of the weights bench with his face covered by his hand, and his shoulders are shaking with barely contained laughter.

"Does no one fucking knock anymore, and doorbells aren't a thing now either?" I snap.

Mikhail whirls around to face me. "I called you ten times, asshole. You weren't answering. I thought you were dead, so I made Danya drive us here to come check on you."

I throw my arms up. "And you still didn't knock?"

"Trust me, I wish we did."

He groans and rubs his buzz cut again like he's trying to erase the memory.

Daniil's shoulders shake harder. He's still got his hand over his mouth trying to stop it, but he's laughing now at the whole situation.

I glare at both of them. "I'm alive. The two of you can leave now."

Daniil's laughter dies down, but he's still looking at me with obvious amusement, hand covering his mouth.

"Stop staring at me, jerk."

"Don't fucking talk to him like that," Mikhail snaps and steps closer to me.

"If you've got something to say, say it. Otherwise, get out of my face."

"What did they say to you? What is our father going to do?" Mikhail pushes.

"It doesn't matter, okay?" I throw my hands up because I'm done with this conversation. I don't want to talk about any of it.

“Fuck, sorry for caring,” he mutters. “Mother wants Kelly to come over for Christmas.”

I blink in confusion. “We don’t celebrate Christmas. That’s an American thing.”

“No shit. She wants to throw it for him.”

“For Kelly?” I ask.

“She wants all of us there and she’s planning some dinner or whatever. But I’m not buying any of you assholes presents because none of you deserve anything.”

I narrow my eyes. “What is she planning?”

We’ve never done Christmas, not like they do here in America. For us, it’s New Year’s that matters. That’s our celebration. The idea of a tree and gifts and all of us sitting at a table like some Hallmark bullshit feels completely wrong. She did call me the other day making sure we were okay and wanted to know more about Kelly. Maybe that’s why she is doing this.

Mikhail starts walking toward the door, then turns around. “By the way, since I’m permanently scarred from what I just witnessed, you’re buying me something ridiculously expensive for this whole Christmas bullshit. I’m talking stupidly over the top.” He pauses dramatically. “And Danya says he wants a pony for the emotional damage you’ve caused him.”

He flips me off casually over his shoulder as he walks out. Daniil trails after him but stops just outside the door, turning back to give me the most exasperated head shake and eye roll before following him down the hall. Mikhail’s been doing this since they were children, inventing absurd shit and pretending it’s what Daniil wants since he can’t call him out on it.

I shake my head and rub my jaw. I don’t know what my mother is planning for this whole Christmas circus, but I trust her.

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Chapter 28

Kelly

I scratch my head and stare into the wardrobe like it might offer some divine guidance.

What do you wear when you're about to go meet a family filled with insane mafia psychopaths? When Alexei told me his mother wanted us to come to her house for Christmas, I thought he was joking.

Alexei's very suspicious about this. Which makes me even more nervous about what I should even wear to this thing.

I look at my shirt and curse under my breath. Nope, this is not going to work at all.

I start taking off the shirt and dig through my closet for another option, tossing rejected pieces onto the bed.

"Are you changing again? We're going to be late."

I glance over my shoulder and glare at him. "Don't start with me. You can wait on the couch."

He looks so freaking good in black dress pants and a white shirt with a black suit jacket that fits him perfectly. I've never seen him in a suit before. He looks like he stepped out of a magazine, which makes me feel even more pressure to find something that will make me look presentable instead of like some random guy he picked off the street.

He groans when I pull out another sweater and then put it back immediately.

"If you don't leave this room right now, I will take twice as long getting ready."

He lifts his hands up in surrender. "Fine. I'll pet Clover since at least she doesn't snap at me."

I shake my head and pick up another shirt with a blue jacket that might work with my chinos. This has to be good enough because we really are going to be late if I keep spiraling.

I throw it on and make my way to the living room. I hear Alexei saying something low in Russian as I approach him. I slow down so my steps don't sound so loud and spot him holding Clover against his chest, speaking to her with a genuine smile while using what sounds like a baby voice.

I clear my throat. He looks up with an immediate scowl, turns around to put her down, and walks toward the garage without saying anything.

I rub the back of my head and follow him. When we reach the car, he opens the passenger door for me. I slide in and he closes it behind me before walking around to the driver's side. The engine roars to life and he pulls forward out of the garage, then down the driveway.

"So any final warnings about what not to say or do?"

He shrugs like it's no big deal. "If they start arguing about a fucking vase, we're leaving immediately."

A what?

"Okay, anything else?"

"No, just be yourself."

I stare out the window, watching the scenery blur past. We drive for about ten minutes before approaching a huge black metal gate with the family crest embedded in the center. This one is smaller than the one we passed when we first got to his place. There are four guards outside wearing tactical gear and carrying guns. They nod at the car, and the gate opens smoothly.

We drive up a driveway lined with massive trees on both sides, and a smaller black house comes into view. Men in suits walk out with earpieces.

Seeing the actual mansion, I gasp out loud because calling it a mansion doesn't do it justice. This thing is a palace. Fully black and modern with tinted windows everywhere.

The driveway has a waterfall in the middle with the road circling around it to the front door. The cars parked outside are insane. I spot a purple McLaren that makes my eyes go wide.

"Is that Lina's?" I ask.

"You're looking at Daniil's ugly-ass car," Alexei says with amusement.

"Really?"

He hums in confirmation and parks the car. Then steps out and comes around to open my door.

He puts out his hand, and I grasp it, giving him a small smile. I feel like I'm being swallowed alive by nerves at the thought of meeting his family. His other two brothers who probably think I'm some random guy who's going to get their brother killed.

I'm speechless at what I see inside the house when we walk in. The interior is incredible with the entire floor made out of black marble, gold accents everywhere in the details and décor. With decorative panels covering them from floor to ceiling.

"Come on, let's get this over with," he mutters.

I trail after him while holding his hand, stunned by everything I'm seeing.

I hear shouting when we approach a big open living room.

I spot Mikhail and Daniil sitting in chairs opposite two other men who I assume are his older brothers. They're playing UNO. I didn't expect that from a mafia family.

They all turn around and stop talking when they see us in the entryway.

One of them who looks the oldest stands and drops his cards on the table, straightening out his suit as he walks over to us.

He has a shaved head, thick dark brown beard and brown eyes. The rest follow him.

The older one says something in Russian, and Alexei tenses beside me.

"In English," he says back firmly.

The man clears his throat and is about to speak, but the other one who I think is the second oldest shoves him out of the way with a grin.

His eyes are bright blue, and he has long hair on top that's shaved on the sides. He pushes out his hand toward me. I grab it on instinct.

"I'm Yulian, the bald one is Lev the oldest, and you know the other two idiots, Daniil and Mikhail."

"So what draws you to Alexei? His award-winning personality, or the fact that he's killed more people than most serial killers?" he says, clearly trying to get a reaction.

I open my mouth to respond, but Alexei barks something in Russian, his voice so harsh it makes me jump.

He lets go of my hand and steps up to grab his shirt. Yulian just keeps smiling at him and saying something back in Russian that's clearly designed

to piss him off more.

“That’s enough.”

Lina stands in a red dress with her hair braided and a red bow at the end. She looks gorgeous and festive. “Kelly, follow me. I need help setting the table.”

I nod and walk after her. As soon as we leave the room, I hear it erupting with shouting and the sound of something breaking.

“Don’t mind them, they do that a lot,” Lina says.

“I noticed.”

She hums. I follow her through the house to some sort of formal dining hall with floor-to-ceiling glass windows that overlook the back garden. I can’t even try to wrap my head around how much it cost to build a place like this.

“My husband couldn’t be here; he had a meeting,” she says, giving me a small smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“It’s okay,” I say, even though I’m pretty sure what she really means is that Alexei’s dad doesn’t want to see his son with another man. But whatever, I’m not going to make this harder for her than it already is.

She walks over to an ornate cabinet and starts picking out plates, handing them to me one by one. I take them carefully from her hands. I’m pretty sure these cost more than everything I own. I glance up at the ceiling once, and my eyes go wide at what look like bullet holes. I shake my head and try to focus on not dropping anything.

“Kelly.”

I put down the last plate and look over at her. “Hm?”

“I looked into your file. It said you’re a veterinarian and that your mother died of cancer. I’m sorry for your loss.”

So, Alexei isn’t the only one in this family who has boundary issues.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to be scared of us. I know my sons can be a lot, but they’re all sweet in their own way. Will you tell me how the two of you met?”

We didn’t actually cover this topic beforehand, so do I tell her the truth or sugarcoat it?

I don’t really want to lie to her, so I brace myself for her reaction.

“I was working night shift at the clinic when Alexei broke in and told me he would kill me if I didn’t pull a bullet out of him.”

She doesn’t even react, just nods like this is completely normal. “Did you?”

“Yeah, I managed to get it out. He had lost a lot of blood though and passed out afterward.”

“You didn’t call the police?”

“Uh, no,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck awkwardly.

“Alexei told me you love Christmas, so I put this together for you.”

She squeezes my shoulder. My throat goes tight. She did this for me? Alexei actually listened to me and told his mother that Christmas matters to me?

“Thank you. This means a lot. It’s been really hard since my mom died. I miss her every day.”

She opens her mouth to speak but stops when footsteps approach us.

Alexei walks in with his brothers behind him. Blood coats his fists. Yulian rubs his jaw, furious. I bite my cheek to keep from laughing. This family is unhinged. None of this is normal. Except Lina—she’s amazing. We’ll get along just fine.

Alexei crosses the room, kisses the top of my head, and pulls me into him.

“Are you okay?” he whispers against my ear.

“I think so,” I whisper honestly, because lying to him feels pointless when he can read me so easily. “Your family is a lot to process.”

His arms tighten around me, and Lina watches us with something that might be approval in her eyes.

Mom would’ve liked her. I can’t help thinking it. They would’ve gotten along. Both with that way of seeing straight through bullshit, that quiet strength underneath the elegance. I think Mom would’ve approved of Alexei too, which is wild considering what he does for a living. But she always said you judge people by how they treat you, not by what everyone else thinks. And Alexei treats me like I matter.

Everything about my life is better with him. Different, obviously. Significantly more dangerous and morally questionable. But better in ways I didn’t expect.

He took me to the gun range the other day. Taught me how to shoot, how to reload, how to break it down and clean it and put it back together. How to stand, how to aim, how to breathe through the shot. The feeling when I fired it was incredible.

I felt powerful. For the first time in years, I felt like I could do something. I wasn’t just the guy who froze, who made himself smaller and quieter and hoped the danger would pass. I could fight back. I could protect myself. That feeling changed something in me.

I want to ask him to teach me self-defense too. I want to learn how to defend myself, to not be so scared all the time. I know he’d teach me. He was so proud when I hit the target for the first time.

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Chapter 29

Alexei

I narrow my eyes at my mother when she walks over with the turkey, setting it down like it's something fucking sacred before glancing at Kelly and giving him that sharp smile she does when she's pretending to be warm.

"I made food that Americans like."

I lift my brow at the turkey. I'm sure that's a Thanksgiving thing. Do they even eat it for Christmas? Fuck if I know.

"Wow. Thank you. It looks good," Kelly says, and he actually sounds like he means it, smiling a little as he glances at the table looking impressed.

We all start pulling food onto our plates. The turkey's dry as hell. I don't say anything because she always sends the staff home for the holidays so they can be with their families, which means she actually cooked this herself.

"I think I just chipped a tooth on the Sahara you call dinner," Yulian says, chewing right through another bite without any filter whatsoever.

Everyone groans.

Mother swallows slowly, her jaw tightening. "I spent time making this food. So eat it," she says, pointing her knife at him without even raising her voice.

Yulian gives her a look but shoves another piece in his mouth anyway. He's not completely suicidal.

I glance at Kelly. He's been chewing the same bite for a full two minutes. His eyes flick toward me like he's begging for help or permission to spit it out.

Lev clears his throat to break the tension. “So, Kelly. Tell us about yourself.”

He finally swallows and reaches for his water. “I’m a veterinarian. Between jobs right now. My boss was kind of an asshole, and he died.”

Mikhail snorts with amusement. “Yeah, I heard he choked on a cookie.”

He stabs a piece of potato with his fork, eats it, then immediately picks up a napkin and spits it into it without any shame.

I scratch my forehead with my middle finger aimed at Mikhail. He replies by scratching his jaw with his.

My mother doesn’t even blink. “What do you mean he choked on a cookie?”

Kelly glances at me, his eyes wide with silent panic.

Mikhail coughs into his fist and blurts, “Alexei killed him.”

“You did what?” she asks.

I give him a glare that could cut glass. “Technically he killed himself with that cookie. I had planned to break his neck and push him down the stairs.”

I point my fork at Yulian. “I could have rigged a gas explosion. But that takes out the houses next door too. I don’t like unnecessary mess. You, on the other hand …”

Lev shifts in his chair and opens his mouth like he’s about to launch into some lecture, but our mother cuts him off before he can start.

“Why would you say such a thing? We don’t murder in this family,” she says deadpan, not even looking up from her plate while she cuts another piece of dry turkey.

Yulian scoffs. “You can stop pretending, Mama. If Kelly’s with Alexei, I’m sure he knows that psycho kills people for fun by now.”

Kelly stiffens beside me. I slide my hand onto his thigh under the table, just a calm touch to anchor him. He grabs for mine immediately and clutches it tight.

“I heard about your and Mikhail’s little murder spree that night,” Yulian says. “Three policemen in one night, how very thorough of you both.”

“If you don’t shut up, you might be next. And since you’re so interested in our work, one of those three was that retired detective that Father wanted eliminated.”

He scoffs and leans back in his chair. “Right, like you’d risk our father’s wrath by touching his favorite son.”

I pick up my knife and throw it at his head without hesitation.

He ducks just in time, and the blade hits the wall behind him, sticking there and still humming from the force. He shoots me a glare.

Kelly stares at me with his mouth open, then turns to look at the knife embedded in the wall. Doesn't say a word, just blinks at it like he's processing what just happened.

My mother sighs. "Can we please have one normal holiday where we don't throw knives? I've had to say this to all of you since you were children. What is the matter with you?"

Mikhail snorts. "Kelly's gonna think we're all psychopaths."

Kelly rubs the back of his neck with his free hand, eyes still on the knife, then glances down at where I'm gripping his thigh under the table. He mutters something I can't catch.

Yulian stands and stretches. "No, if we really wanted to scare him, we'd bring up the vase. That's when things really get good."

Mikhail groans and drops his face into his hands. "Don't bring that shit up or we're leaving."

I pick up my fork and point it at him threateningly. "Enough, Yulian."

He rolls his eyes. "What, is that the next thing you're going to throw at me?"

I don't even think about it.

The fork's buried in his thigh before he finishes the sentence, metal sticking out through his pants.

He stares down at it quietly for a second, then picks up his plate and hurls it at me like a fucking frisbee. I duck and it smashes into the cabinet behind me with a crash that makes Kelly flinch hard.

My mother speaks again, her voice tired and resigned. "I'm going to stop throwing family gatherings since none of you can behave. Sit down and stop throwing things."

"You could've hit Kelly," I snap, rising from my chair so fast it crashes back onto the floor. "You are fucking dead."

"Boys. That's enough," Mother snaps, her voice cutting through the tension.

But it's already too late.

Mikhail's up too, pointing straight at Yulian with rage written all over his face. "You're the biggest asshole in this family. Why do you always need to start something?"

Lev cuts in, switching to Russian. “*Can we please just act normal in front of our guest?*”

“*Shut up*,” Mikhail shouts, turning on him with wild eyes. “*You guys are impossible. Why do we keep letting Yulian get away with this shit?*”

Yulian shrugs, calm as ever. Then picks up a knife and flicks it across the table casually. It misses Mikhail but nearly hits Daniil, who jerks back just in time. Mikhail looks at him, then at the knife embedded in the table, then slowly turns back to Yulian and raises his eyebrows.

That was a mistake. Yulian just activated Mikhail’s nuclear button on purpose by doing that.

“*You almost hit Danya with that thing. I’m going to tear you apart, motherfucker*,” Mikhail yells across the table.

I don’t wait to see how it plays out because I know exactly where this is heading. I glance at Kelly. “We’re leaving.”

He doesn’t move, still staring at the chaos around us. At the fork sticking out of Yulian’s leg. At the wall dented from the plate. It’s his first real taste of what my family is like.

I grab his hand again. “Now.”

He stumbles after me with his mouth open. Stunned silent while we pass the table.

Behind us, Mikhail launches himself at Yulian, grabbing him mid-step and slamming him into the floor into a chokehold.

Kelly jumps at the sound of bodies hitting marble. “Did Mikhail just … is he choking him? In front of everyone?”

“Don’t ask,” I mutter, pulling him faster toward the exit.

We walk toward the front door. I can hear furniture breaking behind us.

When I open the door, Calder comes into view on the steps.

I cut him off before he can open his mouth. “Mikhail’s trying to murder Yulian. Go stop him before someone actually dies.”

He mutters a curse, picks up Tank, and bolts past us into the house without another word.

Kelly stares after him with his eyebrows pulled tight. “Why did he look like a vampire covered in tattoos?”

I don’t answer because explaining Calder would take too long.

I open the car door and look at him expectantly. “Get in.”

He doesn’t move at first, just stands there looking back at the house.

“I don’t know what the fuck my mother was thinking,” I mutter while I walk around to the driver’s side. “That was a total disaster.”

I’M CERTAIN MY FAMILY JUST RUINED EVERYTHING AND NOW HE’S GOING TO run. Which means I’ll have to kidnap him for real, chain him to the bed, and wait for Stockholm Syndrome to kick in so he remembers he loves me. That was a fucking mess. I knew exactly how that dinner would go, and I still let her drag him into it anyway.

We walk into the living room, and Kelly bursts out laughing.

“Your family is insane,” he says. “I thought you were the handful, but they’re worse.”

“I’m perfectly sane. They’re the problem.”

“Right. Sure. Perfectly sane. It’s definitely them, not you.”

I scoff and shake my head. “You should have seen last New Year’s. The ceiling got two new holes in it when my father tried to stop Yulian from murdering Lev.”

“Is that what those bullet holes were from? But there were so many.”

“It’s his go-to move to make us stop fighting since we were children.”

“Jesus Christ.” He walks off with his hands on his head, then looks back at me with wide eyes.

“What is this vase thing? Why does everyone keep freaking out when it gets mentioned?”

I groan and tilt my head back toward the ceiling. “Not you too.”

“Is the vase some metaphor for something else?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “*Nyet*. It’s a fucking vase. My great-great-something grandmother smuggled it out of some revolution in Russia. It’s been in my mother’s family ever since. Someone broke it when we were kids, no one confessed, and they’ve been fighting about it for almost twenty fucking years.”

I glance up at him. “Last year, Yulian even made a PowerPoint to prove it wasn’t him. Timeline and everything. Our mother was so distraught she had a photo of the vase framed. That’s in the living room now. The glass is cracked because Mikhail once threw it at my head.”

“I have no idea what to say to any of that.”

“I should have warned you about how they can be.”

“No, Alexei, you could not have prepared me for what I was about to walk into. I think I might excuse myself from family functions from now on.”

I grin at him because that works perfectly for me. “Gives us a reason to stay home then.”

He grins. “Yeah.”

Then he walks up to me and wraps his hands around my neck, pulling me into a kiss. “Come on, let’s go open our presents. Then I want you to fuck me.”

I mentally fist-bump myself and thrust my tongue into his mouth.

He is everything I have ever wanted.

He witnessed my family in its full chaotic force, and he’s still here, still choosing this, still choosing me. My father hasn’t spoken to me since he saw us together. I weirdly don’t care anymore. I have Kelly and that’s all that matters from now on. I pull back just enough to look at him, really look at him. His green eyes are bright with something that makes my chest feel tight.

“You’re not running,” I say, and it comes out quieter than I meant it to.

“No,” he says, his thumbs brushing along my jaw. “I’m not running. Your family is insane, and I’m still here.”

He knows exactly what I am and wants me anyway.

“Presents first,” he says, stepping back with a smile that’s pure mischief.

I follow him toward the bedroom, thinking maybe my mother knew exactly what she was doing. Maybe she wanted Kelly to see what he was stepping into, to choose us with full knowledge of what we are.

“Alexei?” he asks as we walk to the bedroom room.

“*Da*, *zaychik*?”

“Did you break that vase?”

I let out a sigh. “*Nyet*, I didn’t do it. One of those assholes did, and they’ll never admit it.”

He pulls out a present that looks like a complete disaster from under the bed. Wrapping paper crumpled and taped at crooked angles like he wrestled it into submission. I love it already.

He bites his lip and walks over to me, holding it out. “I know it’s not much. I hope you like it.”

I hesitate for a second, then reach for it. My hands are careful as I unwrap it, peeling back the mangled paper slowly like it might fall apart if I'm not gentle enough.

The frame is wooden. A single rabbit burned into the corner, mid-jump, tiny pawprints trailing behind it.

It's us. The first picture we ever took together. Kelly's pressed up against me, smiling at me with the sweetest expression I've ever seen on his face. I'm holding Clover up between us, but I'm not looking at the camera. I'm looking at Kelly. At that smile, as if nothing else in the world existed in that moment except him.

At the bottom of the frame, engraved into the wood: *I love you to the sun and back, forever and always - Kelly.*

I can't breathe right. Can't think past the fact that he made this. That he chose this photo, this frame, these words. That he's standing here giving me proof that I matter to him.

I grab him, pulling him into my arms hard enough that he stumbles forward. I breathe him in like oxygen, bury my face in his neck, hold him so tight I'm probably hurting him, but I can't let go.

I don't know what I did to deserve him. Don't know how I got this lucky. But I'm never letting him go.

He's mine. Completely.

I gift him a custom stethoscope with his name engraved on it, sea green like his eyes. And the keycard. It's for the front door, the gate, everything. Because this is his home now, and he belongs here with me.

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Epilogue

Kelly

Seven Months Later

I can't believe I got a job at the biggest veterinary clinic in New York.

I suspect Alexei had something to do with it, but I don't care. I get to learn way more, work with exotic animals and perform complex surgeries. It's going to be incredible.

My new boss seems nice, though that's not hard considering Gary set the bar pretty low.

The last few months have been perfect, mostly.

Though I did have to sit Alexei down and explain that he can't kill someone because they spilled coffee on me or because they said no to giving me extra napkins, but I'm not really sure if he got the memo.

I walk through the house and look around trying to find him, but it's empty. I listen for sounds and come up empty until I hear the rhythmic pounding of a hammer coming from outside.

I slide the door open and step into the garden where Alexei has been building a fenced area for Clover so she can run around outside without us worrying about her escaping.

He even added a small waterfall, which is so over the top.

I try to muffle my steps while I approach him. He's crouched shirtless with his tattoos on display, wearing a backward black cap and black jeans

that hang low on his hips. His muscles strain each time he leans forward to pick up another nail and slam it into the wooden fence.

I try to walk as carefully as possible without alerting him, but he stops mid-swing.

“Your sneaking around is as good as your cooking.”

Damn it. “Stop insulting my cooking.”

“It’s not an insult if it’s true.”

“What are you doing out here anyway?” I ask, rubbing the back of my head.

He stands up and looks down at me, that ridiculous V-cut in full display above his low-hanging jeans.

“I got Clover a friend.”

I blink. “What?”

“I said I got Clover a friend.”

“No, I got that part. What do you mean a friend though?”

He gestures toward the fenced area. A white lionhead rabbit sniffs around the bushes.

He did not …

He actually did.

I told him a few months ago that maybe we should get her a friend, but I didn’t think he was listening since he was busy packing weapons for his “office job” at the time.

“You did not just go steal a rabbit and shove it into the same space with Clover.”

“I didn’t steal her; I bought her. The woman at the store said she was a girl.”

“You can’t just throw two rabbits together, they’ll fight. They’re territorial.”

He scoffs and waves a hand dismissively. “They’ve been fine. Nothing’s happened.”

I look over at the white rabbit and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Are you sure it’s a female?”

“The woman said so.”

“Please tell me you double checked,” I mumble, then open the gate to the fenced area.

I slowly approach the white rabbit and let it sniff my hand before picking it up carefully. I lift the rabbit up and inspect it closely, turning her

around.

“Alexei, this is a male.”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Works fine. I was going to name her Bullet, so it can be a him and still keep the same name.”

“That’s not the problem here. Have you ever heard the phrase *fuck like rabbits*?”

“Who hasn’t.”

“Yes, exactly. Rabbits are very fertile. He’s probably already gotten her pregnant. It wouldn’t surprise me if it happened within hours.”

He scowls. “He assaulted her?” His hands reach for the rabbit, but I pull away and wrap my arms protectively around the small animal.

“What? No, he didn’t assault her. It’s just what rabbits do naturally.”

He snaps something in Russian while resting his hands on the back of his head like he’s trying not to explode.

“That woman is fucking dead. I will pay her a visit tonight.”

I wince. “Stop. We went over this. Killing innocent people is wrong.”

His eye twitches.

I carefully put the rabbit down, then walk over to him and grab his shoulders, pulling him into a hug. I burst out laughing. I know he’s been struggling these last few months. His father still won’t speak to him since that day, and it’s heartbreaking to witness. So if buying another rabbit will cheer him up, I’ll let him have it, and we’ll even keep the name Bullet, no matter how ridiculous it is.

“Listen, it’s fine, and Bullet is actually a very nice name,” I say, trying to sound reassuring and totally lying.

He hums and wraps his arms around me, resting his head on top of my hair. I feel him breathing in my scent, and I can’t help but smile.

I look into his brown eyes. “Come shower with me?”

When he grunts, I grab his hand, lacing our fingers together as we walk into the house.

I slide the door open, and we head toward the bathroom, and as soon as we enter the small space, he’s on me.

He slides his hands down my back, firm and sure, grips lower, then lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist and hook my arms around his neck, dragging him closer, greedy for the way he tastes.

He moves his mouth down, kissing and licking along my jaw, then my neck. His teeth sink in hard. He sucks at the skin, leaving a mark.

My body jerks as my cock reacts fast, already straining against my pants.

He pulls back and looks down at me with that soft expression. “We take this to the shower. Then I have a surprise for you.”

I don’t think I can handle more surprises today, but I know he means well.

“What’s the surprise?”

“Wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you, *zaychik*.”

I have a feeling it involves the Empire State Building and a ring.

He’s horrible at hiding things. I found the ring box when I went into the garage looking for something and discovered it stashed where he keeps his weapons, along with a paper that had a date and “Empire State Building private sightseeing” written on it.

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the only reason I was rambling about never seeing the view that night at the clinic was because he was pointing a gun at me.

I was in full panic mode and babbling about anything that came to mind. The real reason I’ve never been up there is because I’m terrified of heights but explaining that now feels like it would ruin whatever elaborate plan he’s put together.

I also stumbled across his … collection, for lack of a better term.

Alexei’s a goddamn kleptomaniac, and apparently, I’ve been his primary target since we met. Mystery solved on why my stuff kept vanishing.

The box was tucked under his workbench in the garage like a twisted time capsule. My favorite coffee mug with the chip on the handle, still stained with dried rings crusted inside. My old pillowcase that I thought the laundromat ate. My grocery list, handwritten on a ripped piece of paper. A few T-shirts and socks. Even my boxers and my freaking hairbrush, for fuck’s sake.

The weirdest part was that he’d kept them exactly how I left them. Coffee stains and all. Like he wanted to preserve pieces of me in their natural state.

I stared at it for a solid minute, trying to process that this terrifying man had been collecting pieces of me like some kind of obsessive crow. Never mentioned it. Never will. It’s going straight into the vault of things we

pretend doesn’t exist, right next to the delusion that he has a normal office job and isn’t from one of the oldest mafia dynasties.

“Okay,” I finally say softly and then pull him down for another kiss.

As his lips meet mine, I can’t help but think about how drastically my life has changed since he came into it.

I was surviving paycheck to paycheck, living in fear of David showing up at my door, drowning in debt, and counting down the days until he would finally kill me. Now I’m standing in a bathroom that’s bigger than my old apartment, kissing a man who is without a doubt the love of my life.

There are two rabbits in our backyard, one of whom is probably pregnant because Alexei can’t tell the difference between male and female rabbits.

I have a job I actually love, working with animals that challenge me instead of just patching up the same cats and dogs every day.

The debt is gone, David is gone, and for the first time in my life, I feel happy and complete.

The End

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What's Next in the Empire of Sins Series?

Mikhail and Daniil are next!

They took over my heart the moment I started writing this series and I hope after meeting them in this book they've taken over yours too. This is my version of best friends to lovers. But with mafia stakes, complicated feelings and morally gray everything. Their story is messy and devastating and completely consuming and a lot angstier than what you've seen so far.

You'll get their full story in Book 2. And yes, there will be arguments about whether Daniil cheats at UNO. He swears he doesn't. Mikhail has opinions about that.

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About the Author

L. Norell is an author based in Sweden who reads too much, leaves the house too little and has been making up stories about fictional people since before she can remember.

After years of writing books just for herself, she finally decided to unleash one on the world. You're welcome. Or sorry. Depending on how you feel about morally gray men doing terrible things for love. When she's not writing she's stress baking, online shopping with zero intention of buying anything and rewatching the same show for the fifth time.

Find her on social media if you want front row seats to the chaos.

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